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Ruth Lopez, 12, shows the bandage on her right arm Thursday night where she was treated for bites sustained in a pit bull attack earlier in the day. She was treated and released from Northeast Memorial Hospital.

STEVE UECKERT: CHRONICLE



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Pit bulls attack girls leaving bus stop

By LINDSAY WISE
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Harris County sheriff's deputies shot and killed a pair of pit bulls that attacked two girls on their way home from school in north Harris County on Thursday afternoon, dragging one of them down the street as she screamed for help.

Although the two dogs had owners, authorities have not determined whether any charges will be filed. It's an incident that state legislators will likely point to as they continue to press this legislative session for stiffer penalties against owners who violate leash laws, allowing dangerous dogs to roam free.

Late Thursday, a 7-year-old girl remained hospitalized at Northeast Memorial Hospital, where her condition was unknown. She is expected to recover, authorities said.

Twelve-year-old Ruth Lopez, who was treated at the same hospital and released, said the dogs didn't attack at first.

Ruth said she was walking home from her school bus stop about 4 p.m. when the two pit bulls approached her in the 3900 block of Cypress Knee Lane. She said she froze as the black and white dogs approached, hoping they would leave her alone. They passed her, but when Lopez turned around to see if they had left, they were following her.

"They started chasing me and I started screaming," Ruth said. "I dropped my backpack and the white one got in front of me and I tripped, and the black one got behind me and grabbed my ankle with his teeth. I was crying and screaming."

She said a neighbor tried to beat the dogs away with a stick, but the dogs attacked him as well. Ruth and the neighbor then ran to a nearby truck and climbed into the bed.

Meanwhile, someone had called an ambulance, Ruth said. Five or 10 minutes after it arrived, the dogs attacked the 7-year-old girl farther down the street, dragging her along the sidewalk as neighbors and paramedics rushed to her aid.

The dogs finally released the girl and escaped into a nearby wooded area, where they were shot and killed by the deputies, who were searching for them in the brush.

"They pretty much do what they have to do to protect people," said Lt. John Martin, sheriff's spokesman.

After the attack, Carlos Lopez, Ruth's father, said pit bulls should be banned in Harris County.

"I know it's a nice-looking dog, but it's not a pet. My daughter was lucky," said Lopez, who said he

had a pit bull puppy three years ago but gave it away because it was too aggressive.

Tougher penalties sought

A spate of pit bull attacks has compelled state lawmakers to introduce bills imposing stiffer penalties for owners of pit bulls that attack people.

Senate Bill 405, introduced by Sen. Jeff Wentworth, R-San Antonio, will require tighter control of dogs.

Sen. Rodney Ellis, D-Houston, has introduced legislation to give Harris County the power to ban dangerous pets. He also is pushing another bill that allows the state's four largest counties — Harris, Dallas, Tarrant and Bexar — to regulate animal sales by roadsides and in parking lots in unincorporated areas.

Other lawmakers are pushing bills aimed at increasing criminal penalties for owners whose dogs cause serious bodily injury or death.

It's currently a Class A misdemeanor punishable by up to a year in jail.

The owner of a dog that kills someone unprovoked could be charged with a second-degree felony punishable by two to 20 years in prison under House Bill 1355 by Rep. Dan Gattis, R-Georgetown. Serious injury could draw a third-degree felony charge, punishable by two to 10 years.

The owner would have to be criminally negligent or know that the dog was dangerous and fail to properly secure it.

Under a bill by Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, D-El Paso, a fatal dog attack could mean a third-degree felony charge for the owner, and a serious-injury attack would be a state jail felony carrying a sentence of up to two years.

In Conroe, the City Council recently passed a dangerous-dog ordinance designed to protect residents from dogs running at large in the community.

The ordinance requires dangerous dogs to be spayed or neutered, microchipped, handled on a leash by a capable person older than 18, and kept in an enclosure with 8-foot walls, a concrete floor and a roof.

The new law also carries fines of up to \$500 per offense.

The proposed legislation was spurred by the attack of a 10-year-old San Antonio girl who died after being attacked by her neighbor's dog while trying to help the animal after it had gotten its collar caught on a chain-link fence.

Last Thanksgiving, a 4-year-old Houston boy was killed after he was attacked by two pit bulls. Pedro "Pitchy" Rios Jr. died after being injured by the dogs outside his home in east Harris County.

The boy and his 2-year-old brother, Peter, were playing outside when the pit bulls attacked. The younger boy managed to run away.

Pedro's mother, Rosa Isela Rios, intervened but was unable to save her son.

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