

# Breed-specific laws top canine conference

BY LORRAINE SWANSON | STAFF WRITER

## New Leash hosts Aug. 19-20 event

Francie Steiner, volunteer business director for New Leash on Life Chicago, insists that of the hundreds of dogs rescued by the non-profit, pet rescue group, the only dog she was ever afraid of was a Pekinese with three teeth.

"That includes pit bulls, shepherds and Rottweilers," Steiner said.

Breed-specific laws which ban or strictly regulate certain breeds perceived as "dangerous," including pit bulls, Rottweilers, German shepherds, Akitas, and Dobermans, will be the major focus of NLOL Chicago's first Canine Legislation Conference, Aug. 19-20, at the Palmer House Hilton Hotel.

The conference will bring together dog experts from across the country to discuss a variety of topics affecting dog owners and communities, including breed-specific laws and why they are ineffective and what communities can do to create positive and effective alternatives.

"Any dog can attack someone, it's not specific to just one breed," Steiner said. "Breed-specific legislation punishes responsible dog owners who take the appropriate actions to spay and neuter, and microchip their dogs."

The first day of the conference features breakout sessions on such topics as dog bite statistics and dog ownership trends, breed-specific legislation basics, developing effective political relationships and understanding the judicial system, and dog fighting.

The second day will bring all of the conference presenters together for an in-depth, Q&A session.

Keynote speakers include Ledy VanHavage, Midwest director of legislative affairs for the ASPCA on Saturday; and syndicated pet columnist and host of WGN-AM's "Pet Central" Steve Dale.

According to Steiner, breed-specific legislation is ineffective because it is generally unenforceable. Most such laws are vague and hastily passed by communities, usually in the wake of sensationalized media stories of dog attacks, particularly pit bulls. Some legislation bans ownership or requires dog owners to carry expensive liability insurance for their pets.

"If you have one of these breeds of dogs, people are already approaching them with prejudice," Steiner said. "That's why the conference is focusing on responsible dog ownership that doesn't turn these dogs into scapegoats. There are things that poodles or schnauzers can get away with that pit bulls can't."

The name "pit bull" refers to a specific category of dog, not a breed. Types of dogs commonly associated with name "pit bull" include the American Pit Bull Terrier, the American Staffordshire Terrier and the Staffordshire Bull Terrier, or mixed-breed dogs with one of these combinations.

While NLOL rescues all types of dogs, regardless of their age or breed, a good number are pit bulls. Steiner said the pet rescue group typically will not allow first-time owners to adopt pit bulls, which require more maintenance and experienced dog owners.

"We've seen how sweet these-so-called dangerous breeds are," Steiner said. "Pit bulls are one of the snuggliest breeds. We do require that if people adopt a pit bull that the dogs are taken to training. Our dogs are ambassadors for the breed and we want them to be exemplary. They're really great, great dogs and very loyal to their owners. We tell people who adopt them to be prepared to snuggle."

NLOL Chicago is staffed entirely by volunteers that are committed to finding loving homes for shelter dogs who would otherwise be euthanized.

Other sponsors of the 2006 Canine Legislation Conference are the Kansas City Dog Advocates and A&S AMSTAFF/APBT Rescue.