

Dog groups seek to sway legislation

Target bad owners, not breeds, they say

By Charles Sheehan
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Pushing back against what they called unfair media coverage, dog advocates said Saturday that the public would be better served by laws that target bad owners--not pit bulls or Rottweilers.

The 2006 Canine Legislation Conference, held in downtown Chicago, may be the first of its kind to devote its entire agenda to "breed-specific legislation," or laws that target dogs like pit bulls, according to national animal advocacy groups in attendance.

Organizers said they hope it is the beginning of a more focused and sophisticated response to a slew of municipal laws that ban specific breeds of dog.

The conference runs through Sunday.

Presentations included "developing effective political relationships" and "dog-bite statistics and dog-ownership trends from a social science perspective."

A consistent criticism from those in attendance was how the media portray pit bull or Rottweiler attacks, media that include the Chicago Tribune, said Ledy VanKavage, senior director of legal training and legislation for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

"It's not just the Tribune, it's rampant. What we see as a result are laws that target pit bull-type dogs, which means any dog," VanKavage said. "This is America and these dogs are property. An officer who knows nothing about dogs could say it looks like a pit bull and kill it and that's un-American."

In the week before the conference, the Tribune ran a three-part series on a McHenry County boy's struggle to heal after a pit bull attack that left him badly mauled.

A Tribune editorial that followed the series called pit bulls "unpredictable."

Conference organizers showed slide after slide of data to dispute that assertion.

But organizers want to do more than preach to the converted, even though not all of the people in attendance were owners of pit bulls or Rottweilers.

Pit bulls and Rottweilers may be the target today, but any other breed could be next, was the message.

For example, presenters said Los Angeles County recently passed a mandatory spay and neuter ordinance that applies to all dogs.

Though the intended targets of the neutering law were Rottweilers and pit bulls, the ordinance was broadened to apply to all dogs so it would pass legal muster, according to Jan Cooper, who chairs the legislative committee of the American Rottweiler Club.

Purebred dogs registered with certain breed clubs are exempt, but Cooper said very few dogs belong to recognized clubs.

"They are singling out in a reverse manner multitudes of breeds that could never comply, therefore ending the existence of those breeds."

In a presentation, Cooper highlighted dozens of breeds that have been banned in communities across the United States and in other countries.

There are a dozen or so large groups pushing back against breed-specific legislation, said Aron Woolman, who helped organize the event. He and others aren't sure if that loose coalition would eventually merge into a regional or national group focusing only on specific breed legislation.

The wave of new laws has become significant enough, however, to spawn a conference this weekend that drew people from 12 states and Canada, Woolman said.

One of the presenters was Jeff Armstrong, who lobbied hard for the passage of Illinois legislation often called Ryan's Law, after Armstrong's son. The child, 7 at the time, was injured by a Rottweiler in 2001.

The measure authorizes counties to increase penalties against owners of dogs that attack people and to establish liability for dog owners.

Armstrong is not a dog owner, but like many at the conference, he said he would like to see more states adopt legislation that targets owners. Initially, he, too, wanted to ban Rottweilers and other breeds, he said.

But after researching dog attacks, he said he changed his mind.

"It's like banning red SUVs if a loved one is run over by a red SUV," Armstrong said. "I know it's like the [National Rifle Association], but it's true. You don't punish the dog or all dog owners because of one bad owner."

Organizers filled the conference with plenty of images showing the softer side of dogs.

There were posters with iconic, black-and-white images of children holding pit bull terriers.

There was talk of finding a new poster boy for the movement, perhaps, some suggested, the winner of the "Best in Show" category during the Westminster Kennel Club dog show.

The winner was Ch. Rocky Top's Sundance Kid, a colored bull terrier.
