BUILDING SAFE COMMUNITIES

Positive Things Happen When You Combine a Proactive Community with Breed Neutral, Nondiscriminatory Laws.
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animalfarmfoundation.org
We all want our communities to be safe for people and pets. Safe communities happen when we treat all dogs as individuals and empower pet owners to be responsible.

This involves introducing laws that are nondiscriminatory and breed neutral. A focus of these laws should be centered around negligent dog owners and not based on the appearance of a dog.

Laws and community programs which foster responsible ownership are central to a safe communities.

Introduction to Why Humane Communities are Safer For people and pets

People must be responsible for the dogs in their care - this is for the safety of their dogs, as well as other pets and people in the community. Officials must enforce these laws to ensure a safe community.

It is important to stress that the majority of communities are safe and the number of dog bites across the country is relatively low. But, for those looking to craft new regulations or update existing ones, it’s important to remember that these ordinances should combine common sense laws with community outreach. This ensures that everyone has access to the necessary resources for compliance.

It also means that pets won't have to suffer simply because of how they look and people won't be discriminated against simply because of the dogs they own.
We all want to decrease euthanasia rates, encourage responsible pet ownership and support the human-canine bond, but mandates about spaying and neutering dogs aren't necessarily the way to achieve those goals.

Most dog owners want to provide good care for their pets, but some need assistance.

If we want safe and humane communities, then we should provide accessible and affordable spay/neuter services. This gives everyone the opportunity to be a responsible pet owner.

Accessible and targeted services paired with outreach and education is how you reach the majority of dog owners. Mandatory spay/neuter laws won't do that.

Mandatory spay/neuter laws criminalize dog owners who want to provide good care for their pets but cannot afford it.

In 2005, San Francisco, California implemented a mandatory spay/neuter law for “pit bull” dogs and “pit bull” dog mixes.

As soon as the measure passed, some San Francisco dog owners faced landlord ultimatums: keep the dog and move, or be evicted. Although “pit bull” dogs were still legal, the law's designation of “pit bull” dogs as a special “problem” had stigmatized both the dogs and their owners.

Breed specific mandates endorse discrimination and profiling of all kinds, including by landlords and insurance companies.

Kansas City, Missouri’s breed-specific mandatory spay/neuter laws resulted in a steady increase in, not only its “pit bull” dog euthanasia but also the number of all dogs euthanized.

Los Angeles, California passed mandatory spay and neuter laws for all dogs in 2008. Five years later 38% more dogs were impounded and 56% more dogs were euthanized than in 2007, the prior year of the ordinances taking effect.
Without community outreach, mandatory spay/neuter laws often don’t affect the owners they were designed to reach. Those with limited resources may be unable to comply with regulations - which criminalizes well-meaning pet owners.

Pet guardians who are unable to get their dogs spayed/neutered for financial reasons may have to pay a fee for being in violation of the law. If they already cannot afford to have their dog spayed or neutered, it is unlikely that they can afford to pay a fine. There is also the possibility that the dog may be taken by animal control, leaving the owner with yet another fee to reclaim their dog. In some cases, this may increase euthanasia rates.

However, “shots fairs” in lower income communities have a positive impact on dogs and owners. These fairs offer affordable and easily accessible vaccinations and spay/neuters, as well as education about responsible dog ownership. They result in fewer shelter intakes and lower euthanasia numbers.

Since 2010, the Humane Society of the United States’ Pets for Life (PFL) program has operated in 20 areas across the United States. Over 87% of the dogs they encounter are unaltered. Through community outreach, which sometimes includes door to door canvassing, and vouchers for free services, 89% of the unaltered pets the PFL teams encounter are spayed or neutered due to the program.

Pets for Life reports that due to lack of access to affordable veterinary services:

"Most people have not had access to quality wellness information and care resources for their pets. A strong majority of pets in PFL communities have not seen a veterinarian before meeting the PFL outreach teams. This is due to the lack of access to affordable veterinary services, not a lack of interest or care from the people."

In Florida, the City of Jacksonville and First Coast No More Homeless Pets partner to provide free and low-cost spay/neuter surgeries for dogs and cats. Since 2002, the partnership has facilitated over 107,000 pet sterilizations. The city has seen an overall reduction in pet intake and a 90% decrease in euthanasia.

By providing targeted incentives instead of issuing mandates, Jacksonville, FL is better serving its pets and pet owners.

The "hardest to reach" people are actually reachable if you implement voluntary programs with special offers that address the specific needs of community members.
Not only are proactive programs cost effective, in the end they are our only hope to end pet overpopulation. Bitter experience has shown that we cannot adopt our way out of pet overpopulation or build our way out. A system that continues to spend upwards of 95% of its resources on reactive programs is doomed to failure and frustration.

Investing in proactive programs allows the increasing reallocation of resources to proactive programs, building momentum to the day when shelters will realize their century-long mission – to rescue and rehabilitate homeless animals and find a loving home for each and every one.

-- Peter March, Esq
The Responsible Pet Ownership Model is focused first on supporting and incentivizing responsible behavior in pet owners and second, discouraging problematic behavior. Former Director of Animal & Bylaw Services for Calgary, Bill Bruce, elaborated on the why this is the focus of the philosophy, because “a positive change in human behavior will always yield a positive change in animal behavior.” Bruce explained, “The foundation of any successful program starts with collaboration between all agencies involved with animals and a common understanding of the community’s acceptable standards. With this knowledge, we can create programs and self-sustaining services that foster responsible pet ownership through education and recognizing the benefits of compliance, rather than relying solely on compulsion. Certain traditional approaches only create barriers to responsible pet ownership.”

Every community should identify what the components of responsible pet ownership should be. The City of Calgary enacted its Responsible Pet Ownership Bylaw in 2006, based on five principles that enable cats, dogs, their owners, and neighbors to live together in “safety and harmony.”

1. License and provide permanent identification for your pets.
2. Spay or neuter your pets.
3. Provide training, socialization, proper diet, and medical care for your pets.
4. Do not allow your pets to become a threat or nuisance in the community.
5. Procure your pet ethically and from a credible source.

Though the foundational points are simple, if all pet owners in a community did them, the majority of a community’s animal issues would be solved. Bruce explained, “Licensing and identification quickly reunite lost pets with their families; spay and neuter initiatives reduce unwanted litters humanely; proper training and care produces safe, healthy animals; and proper management prevents pets from becoming a threat or nuisance, and reduces community complaints about animals.”

Through 2012 Calgary achieved an unparalleled level of compliance with its easy-to-understand bylaw, through education that clarified the responsibility of all pet owners and programs that facilitated and incentivized pet owner compliance.

In 2012, public education programs included collaborative events with parks groups about pet owner’s responsibilities under the bylaw, as well as presentations on responsible pet ownership in English and French that reached 9,200 elementary and junior high students. Additionally, Calgary incentivized licensing for residents with a rewards program in collaboration with local merchants and a “Drive Home Program” where pet owners could tangibly see the benefits of licensing their pets through a quickly returned lost pet that would be driven directly home, rather than to the shelter. On the rare occasion when education did not produce the intended outcome, the Bylaw was rigorously enforced.
2012 Results:3,5,6

- Animal Services Operations funded primarily through licensing revenue.
- 92% of animal calls were “successfully resolved through compliance rather than strict enforcement options.”
- 108,688 dogs licensed out of a canine population of 122,325; 89% license compliance rate for dogs.
- 1,185 lost dogs were taken directly home through the Drive Home Program, avoiding the shelter.
- 201 reported dog bites in a human population of 1,120,225. 132 dog bite charges were laid.

*In the years following 2012, Calgary’s Responsible Pet Ownership Bylaw core programs, such as a focus on public education and licensing, have changed, and consequently, the results have changed. When animal control relies heavily on enforcement, as opposed to focusing on educating citizens on the benefits of the responsible pet ownership standards and facilitating and incentivizing compliance with them, the community results suffer.

As Bill Bruce notes, the “downward trend confirms that the Responsible Pet Ownership model does work and is not because Calgary as a community is an anomaly.” As the results show, when you “stop applying the model, the results will deteriorate back to the old animal control results.”

Updated February 2016

SOURCES and NOTES:

6. The 2010 total canine population was used to calculate the estimated rate of license compliance.
All dog owners are responsible for the dogs in their care. Consider the difference between Resident & Family dogs:

**A RESIDENT DOG**

Resident dogs are dogs, whether confined within a dwelling or otherwise, whose owners maintain them in ways that isolate them from regular, positive human interactions. The isolation and lack of exposure to the family unit results in the display of behaviors different from family dogs.

*Left:* Windsor as a resident dog.

**A FAMILY DOG**

Family dogs are dogs whose owners keep them in or near the home and also integrate them into the family unit, so that the dogs learn appropriate behavior through interaction with humans on a regular basis in positive and humane ways.

*Left:* Windsor as a family dog.

We will achieve safer, more humane communities when we hold owners of all dogs accountable to high standards of humane care, custody, and control.
MEDICALLY ATTENDED DOG BITES

HOW OFTEN DO DOG BITES REQUIRE MEDICAL ATTENTION?

MOST OF THE ESTIMATED 4.5 MILLION DOG BITES PER YEAR CAUSE NO HARM

81%
Slight or no injury
Caused no injury or injury too slight for medical treatment

18.99%
Treated and released
No hospitalization

0.01%
Serious
Injuries resulting in hospitalization from CDC data on dog bite injuries presented for treatment in Emergency Departments.

Sources for this graph

NATIONAL CANINE RESEARCH COUNCIL
A RESEARCH & POLICY THINK TANK
NATIONALCANINERESARCHCOUNCIL.COM
According to the most widely cited studies of dogs bites\(^2\) at least 4 out of 5 (80\%) of all dog bites cause no injury at all or injuries so minor that no medical treatment was sought, even though the threshold for medical treatment may well be lower for dog bite injuries than for those from other causes.

The rate of dog bites sustained by children has been steadily decreasing over the last decade:

![Graph showing rates of children medically attended for dog bites (per 10,000): 2001-2013.](image)

**HOW SEVERE ARE THESE INJURIES?**

Among injuries presented for treatment at Emergency Departments, dog bite injuries are generally much less severe than the typical injury:

- 96\% of dog bite injuries presenting at ER’s are minor\(^4\)-- the person is treated and released. Dog bite injuries are among the highest rate of treat and release for any injury tracked by the CDC.
- Less than 1.5\% require hospitalization\(^5\), unlike injuries in general, which result in hospitalization more than 4 times as often.

Severity comparisons with other common injury modalities may be helpful here:

- Kids 1-12 who go to the ER with an object stuck in an ear, eye, or nose\(^6\) are more than 3 times more likely to be injured seriously enough to be hospitalized than those who present with a dog bite. This does not include objects swallowed or stuck in a child’s throat or airway which are even more serious.
- Injuries caused by shoes and socks\(^7\) (not counting sports shoes) are almost 4 times more likely to require hospitalization than dog bites.

Sources for this graph\(^3\)
OUR DATA

To produce comparisons such as those above, and graphics such as the chart on rates of bites to children, we use the Center for Disease Control’s Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS) for dog bites and other injury modalities and the Consumer Product Safety Commission for product related injuries, both of which use the National Electronic Injury Surveillance System (NEISS). This provides the most reliable data because NEISS:

- Collects large samples, gathering data from a nationally representative sample of 100 hospital emergency departments, ranging from large inner-city hospitals with trauma centers to suburban, rural, and children’s hospitals
- Is based on actual emergency room intake data
- Provides clear indicators of injury treatment severity
- Have been consistently replicated each year over a long period
- Allow for ready access to comparisons by year, age group, gender, and kind of injuries
- Limitation—NEISS captures injuries treated in hospital emergency departments, not private doctor’s offices or urgent care clinics

We do refer to the most frequently cited studies but only as a source of overall bite incidence, including those that cause no injury. We do not use them as our primary source of bite severity or injurious bite incidence because they:

- Are based on small sample telephone surveys asking people to remember events over a year’s time
- Had low respondent rates and wide margins of error
- Are one time surveys that quickly become dated and are seldom replicated
- Provide only vague distinctions between injurious and non-injurious bites and vague definitions of injury

Updated February 1, 2016

SOURCES and NOTES:

1. Slight or No Injury & Treated and Released:
   Gilchrist et al., 2008 (see below) was used for the total number of bites, and for the percentage receiving medical treatment, as this (and the predecessor, Sacks et al., 1996) is the only study that has attempted to include non-injurious incidents in dog bite counts.

   **Serious:**
   Query: Bite: Dog; Disposition: Transferred or Hospitalized; Years: 2001-2003 [Averaged]
Fatalities:

Gilchrist, J., Sacks, J.J., White, D., & Kresnow, M.J. (2008). Dog Bites: Still a Problem? *Injury Prevention*, 14(5), 296-301. These 2 studies are the source of the frequently cited 4.5 million annual dog bite rate in the United States, and are the result of a telephone survey of all types of injuries sustained by members of 5,238 households in the 1996 study and 9,684 in the study published in 2008. The results include all bites that the respondents could recall during the preceding year, including those that caused no injury.

Query: Bite: Dog; Disposition: All Cases; Years: 2001-2013 [Separate query each year]; Age Group: 0-4
Query: Bite: Dog; Disposition: All Cases; Years: 2001-2013 [Separate query each year]; Age Group: 5-9
Query: Bite: Dog; Disposition: All Cases; Years: 2001-2013 [Separate query each year]; Age Group: 10-14
Query: Bite: Dog; Disposition: All Cases; Years: 2001-2013 [Separate query each year]; Age Group: 1-12
All rates converted from 100,000 to 10,000.

Query: Bite: Dog; Disposition: Treated and Released; Years: 2001-2012

Query: Bite: Dog; Disposition: All Cases; Years: 2001-2012.
Query: Bite: Dog; Disposition: Hospitalized; Years: 2001-2012; Custom Age Range: 1-12.

Query: Foreign Body; Disposition: Hospitalized; Years: 2001-2012; Custom Age Range: 1-12.

Query: Code 1645 (daywear socks); Year: 2012
Query: Code 1615 (non-athletic shoes); Year: 2012

8. This system collects data from a large sample of emergency departments, in a standardized methodology since 2000 ensuring valid comparisons from year to year. See [http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/facts.html](http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/facts.html) for an explanation of how this data is collected and compiled.


Out of the Past

Updating your Animal Control Ordinance

By Cory A. Smith for Animal Sheltering Magazine July/August 2012

How long has it been since your local animal control ordinance was updated? Was Clinton still president? Were people wearing skinny jeans - for the first time around? Did the radio station play a lot of Burt Bacharach – or maybe Bing Crosby?

Just as times change, laws can and should change along with them. When it comes to the protection of citizens and animals in a community, an up-to-date, effective animal control ordinance is essential. It not only outlines the basic expectations for those who want the privilege of keeping companion animals, it sets a tone for the community’s attitude towards pets, their guardians, and public safety.

A comprehensive and well-considered animal control ordinance can help ensure immediate as well as long term results – and as with other local laws, animal control ordinances should be tracked and assessed over time as pet ownership trends and other community dynamics shift.

When it comes to the protection of citizens and animals in a community, an up-to-date, effective animal control ordinance is essential.
AN EFFECTIVE ORDINANCE SHOULD:

Protect public safety through mechanisms for preventing animal bites, vehicular accidents, and other dangers caused by free roaming and improperly confined animals.

Protect public health through mechanisms designed to prevent the spread of zoonotic diseases, especially rabies.

Create means to ensure that every pet is traceable to its owner in order to foster pet owner accountability and increase the numbers of lost pets reunited with their owners.

Regulate the behaviors of those selling, boarding, displaying, or otherwise using animals.

Deal with the protection as well as the control of animals, supplementing the state animal laws to establish proper standards for animal care in your jurisdiction.

Treat dogs and cats as the primary concern, but also provide for the control and protection of other species, like small mammal pets, wildlife, and captive exotics.

Anticipate and provide remedies for animal-related problems likely to occur within the community.

Incentivize pet owners to comply with the law (via licensing fees that recognize responsible behaviors, etc.), and penalize those who violate it.

Be well-understood by the people enforcing it, so that problems can be addressed in a proactive, productive manner.

Allow for strong intervention, implementation, and enforcement procedures.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

When assessing whether your current animal control ordinances need an update, it is important to keep in mind how laws are to be implemented, enforced, tracked, and measured to ensure efficacy – and how all these elements will be funded.

Some ordinances work better in some communities than others, and some laws sound better on paper than they actually are in terms of measurable impact on pet populations and animal management.

There is no cookie-cutter approach to creating an effective animal control ordinance. When considering new ordinances, it’s really important to think them through carefully from start to finish.
ASK QUESTIONS LIKE:

How will this make our community better?

Will this help our agency to work smarter, not harder?

Will this have a backlash effect that we haven't thought of yet?

If so, is it one we can avoid by promoting and explaining the reasons for the ordinance in advance of its passage?

How will this affect our staff budget and time?

Outside of our agency, who else will this impact, and do we have their buy-in?

Do we have partnerships with other groups who might have valuable input on these laws?

Will we be able to enforce this fairly and consistently?

Does the animal cruelty statute in place for our community provide adequate protections, or do we want to enhance elements within our local animal control ordinance?

Are there barriers to compliance that we have not considered?

Are there laws already in place that cover the same territory that could be enforced better or differently with the same effects?

Consider the practical implementation of a new law, whether there are adequate resources in place to support the measure, and what real change may come as a result.

Animal control agencies should adopt a tiered approach to the laws that govern their community's relationship with animals. Starting with the most basic laws, such as leash laws and proper confinement laws, is the first step in building a strong foundation.

Once these basic functions of animal control are in place and the community has accepted them as the standard, local governments can take incremental steps towards a comprehensive, progressive set of laws, building an atmosphere that supports the joys of pet companionship while protecting the public and animal health and safety across the board.

A TOOL FOR PREVENTION

An animal control ordinance provides requirements and regulations for the community. But at its best, it also empowers agencies by allowing for new approaches to animal management based on prevention tactics.
Where previous legal prohibitions may be in the way of progressive programs, ordinance amendments can be made to provide animal control agencies with the green light to embark on new initiatives such as legal trap-neuter-return programs for community feral cats, the promotion of spay/neuter and humane wildlife services, and the education and training of animal care and control officers.

Preventing owned dogs and cats from roaming freely is one of the primary elements of basic animal control management in any community. Free-roaming animals pose a risk to public safety (dog bites, auto accidents, etc.), to other animals, and to themselves.

Proper identification is increasingly seen as another fundamental element of animal control regulations.

Restraint laws have traditionally been designed for dogs, and came about largely as a public safety measure. But some jurisdictions have passed restraint requirements for cats – with mixed results.

Owner animals should be required to wear a collar and ID tag, license tag, or have a microchip (ideally an animal should have both, sporting visible ID that can be read by both officers and citizens who happen upon her and a microchip that can be scanned by animal control and shelter staff).

This helps animal control officers determine stray and lost animals’ origins in order to return them home, keeping those animals from long shelter stays and often keeping them from ever entering the shelter.

Restraint laws generally require owners to safely confine pets on their property and adequately restrain them when off. Proper restraint is usually described as “secured by collar and/or leash,” or “under reasonable control” when not on the owners property. Restraint/leash laws exist primarily on the local level – very few states have specific leash requirements for pets – so they are a fundamental part of a good animal control ordinance.

Reminding owners that they are responsible for any physical or property damage their animal may cause while unrestrained is often enough incentive for most people to keep their dogs under control.

**Considering Cats**

Restraint laws have traditionally been designed for dogs, and came about largely as a public safety measure. But some jurisdictions have passed restraint requirements for cats – with mixed results.

Given that many owners still allow their cats to roam outdoors, some cat restraint laws can result in an increase of cat intake to the shelter, resulting in increases in euthanasia. And, if poorly worded, some cat laws can actually prevent lifesaving programs like trap-neuter-return.
When considering how to approach cat management:

Cat overpopulation stands at epidemic proportions today. Shelters are taking in and euthanizing more cats than dogs – in most areas, the ration is 2:1 at least. Approximately 3 million cats are euthanized in shelters each year.

It is estimated that no more than 2-5 percent of cats picked up as strays and taken to a shelter will be reunited with their owners, compared to 15-30 percent of dogs. That equals thousands of cats and even more thousands of dollars for local animal control annually, and when you multiply it by the number of animal control agencies nationwide, the figures become startling.

Given those realities, it’s worth considering whether requirements that cats be confined will keep them safer, or result in a greater influx of cats to local shelters. The answer may depend on your community.

An estimated 50 million feral cats live in U.S. communities. Any ordinances that apply to owned cats need to make specific exceptions for feral cats, since there are no owners to hold accountable. Ordinances that enable nonlethal management of feral cats should be considered.

Passing unrealistic requirements for cat owners is a waste of time, and can have tragic results in more cats being surrendered, abandoned, and euthanized. Cat ordinances should be designed to protect public safety, protect cats, and provide animal control agencies with effective, proactive, productive tools to manage cat populations and keep cats in their homes, while educating cat owners about the importance of spaying/neutering and keeping cats indoors.

Most jurisdictions require cats to be vaccinated against rabies since they rank in the top listings of vector species. Some communities have successfully passed ordinances requiring cat identification (collar and tag) and/or microchipping or licensing for cats, leading to higher than average return-to-owner rates.

Licensed to Thrive

Government-mandated dog registration systems to provide license tags to pet owners in exchange for a fee – commonly called licensing – have had a positive effect in the United States. Communities with higher licensing compliance rates report better numbers for returning animals to their homes, saving shelters space, time, money, and keeping pets out of the shelter system.
These programs have been most successful in communities that spread the message that licensing is a pet protection service rather than a burdensome tax. Pet owners are usually not opposed to shouldering some of the financial responsibility for animal care and control programs when they value the programs and services.

Higher pet registration fees, coupled with promotional strategies and stricter enforcement, almost always results in greater revenues. Licensing fees will not usually cover the full cost of an effective animal control program, but they can be a key supplemental source of income.

Ordinances should specify the requirement that dogs wear the license tag on their collars.

Some jurisdictions have begun to incorporate microchips into their licensing programs as a requirement, and most jurisdictions scan incoming animals for microchips whether they are a requirement or not. But collars and tags are still the No. 1 means for a lost animal to be returned home, whether by a neighbor, Good Samaritan, or animal control agency.

When efficiently run, licensing programs can provide community pet population records, and when your government knows how many pets are in your community, it makes budgeting and setting program goals much easier.

Your public education efforts, record keeping, and ability to target problems in the community will be much more effective with better understandings of the pet population.

One way to engage the community in helping reduce the need for sheltering services and the problem of euthanasia is via differential licensing programs, which require a higher payment to license unsterilized animals. This can serve as an incentive for pet owners to have their animal spayed or neutered, while shifting more of the burden of animal control cost to pet owners who create the need for increased services.

Charging pet owners who allow their pets to contribute to the surplus of companion animals in the community, directly impacting homelessness rates and animal control costs, is a sensible tactic that educates the pet-owning public, but allows people to keep their pets intact if they choose.

Estimates indicate that more than 80 percent of counties and cities in the United States have differential licensing structure in place. Some states require that local governments impose at least a minimal differential; while others leave it up to the jurisdiction.

Most licensing fees for altered animals fall within the $5-15 per year range and unaltered animals fees in the $30-200 per year range. In recent years the trend has been towards increasing the differentials.
The majority of communities across the country require proof of rabies vaccination before issuing a license and registration tags. Some jurisdictions require that veterinarians report rabies vaccinations to the animal control agency, and incentivize veterinarians for selling licenses from their practice, which has been shown to increase compliance rates.

Ordinance sections pertaining to rabies should make it unlawful for any person to own or harbor a dog or cat over the age of 3 months without a valid rabies vaccination.

Rabies control laws should also address quarantine requirements in case of animal-to-human bite incidents, domestic animal-to-animal bite incidents, or contact between domestic animals and wild animals. Rabies control should be considered one of the primary functions of an animal control agency, so government should budget for and organize free or reduced-cost rabies vaccination clinics for residents throughout the year.

These services can be held in conjunction with other community events and can include other public education on animal care and management issues.

An animal control ordinance has the chance to set the tone for pet ownership within your community and for the animal care and control agency itself.
In February 2013, Rhode Island officials introduced House Bill 5287 and Senate Bill 178, targeting “pit bull” dogs. The bills called for statewide regulations for “pit bull” dogs and would have required, among other things, mandatory insurance, confinement, muzzling, and banned walking these dogs within 100 feet of a school. The bills would have created statewide Breed Specific Legislation (BSL). The language was some of the most inflammatory I have ever seen in legislation.

But as I read the legislation, it was clear that this was motivated from a place of deep emotion. My experience has taught me that almost every single instance of proposed breed specific legislation is motivated by emotion – a reaction to a single, frightening event. Or maybe it is a reaction to something frightening that could have happened, but didn’t. BSL is always about the fear of not being safe in our own communities.

I called the senator who sponsored the legislation to ask him if he was willing to tell me about his motivation. I explained that, while on the surface, it may seem that we didn't agree I was certain we really did. I explained that we both probably wanted the same thing - for all the citizens of Rhode Island to feel safe. Although the senator and I did not agree on how to get there, we shared a community of interest. We had established common ground on which to stand. Turns out, I was the first person who had called the senator with solutions regarding building safe communities. Everyone else only made complaints. He asked me to speak with the constituent who’d brought up this legislation in the first place.

I was glad to! The constituent, a dog owner himself, had a scary experience with a dog in his community. While they were out for a walk, another person allowed their dog to severely injure his dog. His dog needed emergency surgery and lots of stitches.

WE ALL WANT TO FEEL SAFE. THAT IS SOMETHING WE ALL CAN AGREE ON.
It was a legitimately terrible experience for this citizen and his family. They were afraid their pet was going to die. They had every right to be angry and frightened. I would have been too.

Afterward, there was a dangerous dog hearing regarding the incident. It became clear that the reckless dog owner didn't care if his dog was destroyed. He'd simply get another dog.

The dog owner was the problem. He'd failed to properly manage his dog. He was the one to blame for the incident. But since the victim does not live under the “pit bull” tent, as so many of us do, he was susceptible to the incorrect notion that the “pit bull” was to blame for what happened. He believed that, in order to prevent this sort of thing from happening to another family, “pit bull” dogs needed to be restricted.

He exhausted all recourse allowed by law, but nothing had really changed. He knew he needed to do something to bring attention to the problem of reckless dog owners.

After months of meeting with his city council, this gentleman met with his senator to discuss a legislative solution. The result was officials proposing statewide breed specific legislation in Rhode Island.

Obviously, I do not agree with their legislative solution. But as a dog owner who would do anything to keep her pets safe, and as a human being who genuinely cares about the wellbeing of her friends and neighbors, I understand why they felt like they needed to do something.

I know firsthand what it feels like to live in a city where officials were considering legislation (fueled by the acts of a single, reckless dog owner) that would force me to either leave my home and my job, or surrender my dog to be killed. I was afraid. And I no longer felt safe in my own community.

I also know what it is like to feel unsafe in my own neighborhood because a reckless dog owner will not properly contain his dog. I have a “pit bull” dog who is still too afraid to go for walks in our own neighborhood because he was bitten by the neighbor’s at-large dog.

In talking with the constituent, it turned out that we're more alike than we are different. Instead of focusing on our disagreements, we started with our shared community of interest and our goals regarding building a safe community.
We discussed how no one has proven that BSL reduces dog bites, but that we do know it fails to increase public safety. We agreed that in order to reach our shared goal of community safety, BSL was not going to be an effective solution.

Together we determined that there was a lot of room for improvement in how Rhode Island dealt with reckless dog owners of any breed or mix. We knew by focusing our efforts there, we could affect real change that increased public safety.

We looked at existing animal control laws and discovered where current ordinances weren't being enforced properly. When current legislation isn't being enforced, introducing new legislation makes little sense. Why not try enforcing what you already have on the books, before introducing new legislation?

We could both see that there were many steps we could take to improve community safety in Rhode Island, without banning dogs based on physical appearance or breed label.

In March of 2013, both bills were withdrawn by their sponsors.

Today, there is still much work to be done, but all the stakeholders now agree that BSL is not going to be the solution.

It's worth noting that I didn't attempt to influence the constituent's decision by talking about how much I love "pit bull" dogs. I was not attempting to change how he felt about “pit bull” dogs. I focused the discussion on our mutual interest in building safe communities because it was clear from the beginning that we were both on the same side.

I shared the research that shows BSL would not lead to an increase in public safety. BSL fails responsible "pit bull" dog owners, such as myself, and it fails our neighbors and fellow community members, such as this gentleman.

We all wind up losing with BSL, no matter what side we're on. The takeaway here is that there is no us vs. them when it comes to wanting to be safe in our own communities. We need to start conversations from that common ground, rather than starting from a place of fear and anger.

Refuse to play the divisive game of us vs. them. That's what we did in Rhode Island, and together, we found a solution that benefits everyone in the community.
OTHER RESOURCES
FOR BUILDING SAFER COMMUNITIES

National Canine Research Council Website:

Pets For Life Community Outreach Toolkit:
https://www.animalsheltering.org/sites/default/files/content/PetsForLifeCommunityOutreachToolkit.pdf

Support, Inform, then Enforce: Basic Principles for Safe Humane Communities from National Canine Research Council:
http://www.nationalcanineresearchcouncil.com/public-policy/effective-policies

Discover Safe Humane Chicago, an Unprecedented Community-Wide Alliance that Combats Violence by Promoting Compassion and Caring for People and Animals:
http://www.safehumanechicago.org/

A Community Approach to Dog Bite Prevention From AVMA:

Dog Bites Problems and Solutions From National Canine Research Council:

For more information, please visit our website:
www.animalfarmfoundation.org
or contact us at:
info@animalfarmfoundation.org

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