

'Safe, Humane Chicago' Combats Dogfighting

Nonprofits, police team up against dogfighting through new educational programs.

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"Safe, Humane Chicago" was launched last week and entails implementing educational programs for children and adults as well as encouraging community members to report crimes of animal abuse through open communication with law enforcement officials.

The initiative was spearheaded by the nonprofit group D.A.W.G. (Dog Advisory Work Group). The effort has already begun with places of worship in the Chicago area lending their facilities to educate children.

"We want to get to children when they're still young and impressionable and give them a positive experience with dogs," says Melia Carter, co-founder of the initiative and D.A.W.G. board member. "What we've seen in high-risk neighborhoods is the children haven't had positive experiences with dogs ... We bring in agility dogs and therapy dogs and at first [the children] are terrified."

Carter adds that after their initial fears dissolve, the children respond positively to the dogs, enjoy their company and are sad to see them go. The second approach to the initiative involves adult education.

"People shouldn't turn their heads," Carter says. "By not turning your heads to dogfighting you're going to get violent crimes out of your communities block by block."

Carter cites a study that found 70 percent of those involved with dogfighting or other animal abuse violations have also been arrested for violent felonies against people. And 86 percent of those who commit crimes against animals have been arrested multiple times for violent crimes.

"Dogfighting isn't a racial or cultural issue," she remarks. "It's a violence issue."

Several groups have already signed on to the alliance including the Chicago Police Department and the Alliance for Community Peace.

Currently, the Safe, Humane Chicago program is operated by volunteers, but Carter adds that they are in the process of securing funding to implement permanent, paid positions to ensure the program is on-going. Eventually, she says she hopes this program will become a prototype for other cities around the country to model.