

Laws and Insurance May Mean Bad News for 'Bad Dogs'

Local laws and insurance companies bite back.

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Posted: Thu Dec 7 00:00:00 PST 2000

In Los Angeles, a spot check by animal control officers determined as many as 44,000 household dogs are let loose each day for short periods of time.

In response, the Humane Society, in conjunction with the U.S. Postal Service, the American Humane Association, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Massachusetts SPCA, sponsor National Dog Bite Prevention Week each summer. The American Veterinary Medical Association and State Farm Insurance Co. jointly sponsor the "Don't Worry, They Won't Bite" campaign to raise awareness about dog bites and promote responsible pet ownership. More than 4 million "Fido! Friend or Foe?" activity/coloring books that outline the rules of dog safety have been distributed to children.

ADOA members battle breed-specific proposals in the trenches. They rely on calls, e-mails and letters from dog owners to alert them about such pending laws. The ADOA has championed the effort since 1976 when it stopped a law banning Pit Bulls in Hollywood, Fla. The court declared the law vague and unconstitutional.

"All was quiet in Hollywood until this year when we heard city leaders were trying to pass this law again," Carvill said.

"We stopped them again. In the 23 years we've been fighting breed-specific laws, we've won 70 percent of our court cases. We feel good that 12 states now have laws outlining methods to control dogs but are not specific to a breed."

The American Kennel Club has a special division that updates members on the status of pending dog laws, including breed-specific and dangerous dogs, in its Legislative Observer newsletter.

On the insurance front, dog bites lead to higher-priced policies, cancellations or mandatory additional coverage. The Humane Society's Dr. Sinclair is helping insurance companies find ways to cut liability costs and still protect responsible dog owners. She opposes policies that ban certain breeds.

"By having insurance agents ask non-breed questions such as, 'Where is the dog kept?' 'Has it had any obedience training?' and 'Is it comfortable around other people?', we think we can save the insurance companies money and make sure dogs with the potential to bite are properly insured," she said.