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Woman charged in her pet's attack on man, guide dog

The Hill 'n Dale man says lack of law enforcement has allowed several attacks against him and his guide dog during the past year.

By DUANE BOURNE, Times Staff Writer
Published October 21, 2003

A Hill 'n Dale woman has been charged, and her cocker spaniel impounded, in what authorities say was the latest attack on David Bearden and his guide dog, Isaac.

The incident occurred about 11:30 a.m. Friday when a dog owned by Helga Curtis, 80, bolted from her yard on Frampton Avenue and chased Isaac, according to a Sheriff's Office report.

Curtis was charged with interfering with the performance of a service dog.

The incident occurred one day after Bearden learned that the State Attorney's Office will not pursue charges against the dog owners in previous attacks. One of those attacks involved Curtis and her dog.

The attacks have drawn the attention of the National Federal of the Blind and the Florida Association of Guide Dog Users, which earlier this summer urged both the Sheriff's Office and the State Attorney's Office to enforce laws that protect guide dogs and their owners. Bearden, 46, is legally blind.

Assistant State Attorney Pete Magrino said Monday that his office closed its investigation last week because there was insufficient evidence to prove that the previous attacks involved reckless disregard on the part of the dog owners.

Magrino said it would be premature to comment on Friday's incident because paperwork had not been filed with his office as of late Monday.

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Bearden said four dogs, including Curtis' spaniel, have attacked him and Isaac 11 times in the past year.

"They had more than enough evidence to charge them," said Bearden. "What that means to me is that the State Attorney's Office is refusing to follow the law."

According to state law, anyone who injures or kills, or permits a dog they own to injure or kill a guide dog or service animal, may be charged with a misdemeanor and, if found guilty, must pay restitution.

On Friday, Bearden said, he and Isaac were walking near the corner of Hill Road and Frampton Avenue in Hill 'n Dale when he heard Curtis' dog barking. In an instant, he said, the dog was charging them.

"The whole event must have taken 15 to 20 seconds," said Bearden. "Isaac was running in circles, trying to get away. He's not ever supposed to do that."

Bearden managed to shoo the dog away without an injury to him or Isaac.

In May, the pair were attacked by another dog, leaving both Bearden and Isaac, a German shepherd, with several puncture wounds.

Bearden wondered Monday why it has taken so long for someone to be charged in any of the attacks.

"This is the first time someone was cited," he said. "They could have stopped (the attacks) in the beginning."

Lt. Charles Hinkle, the District 3 commander, said Monday the Sheriff's Office has taken the attacks seriously and has taken steps to remedy Bearden's concerns and those of others who say dogs are allowed to roam the Hill 'n Dale area illegally.

Since June, Hinkle said, the sheriff's community policing unit and Hernando County Animal Control have patrolled the area east of Brooksville, apprehending seven unrestrained dogs, issuing more than 20 written warnings for unregistered dogs and giving five citations for unrestrained dogs.

"We can only do what the law allows us to do," Hinkle said. "We are trying to do whatever we can for him."

Curtis could not be reached for comment.

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