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Blind woman's guide dog is injured in attack

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VACAVILLE - Every morning, Diane Phelps takes a short walk around her neighborhood, her 9-year-old guide dog Josette leading the way.

The typically uneventful stroll, she said, took a turn down a frightening path Wednesday when another dog broke free from a neighbor's garage and mauled Phelps' black Labrador retriever guide dog.

Josette received several puncture wounds around her neck, including one the size of a half-dollar that required four staples to close.

The guide dog's wounds would have been worse, Phelps said, had the man installing her new carpet not broken up the fight. "He saved her neck, literally," said Phelps, after returning from the veterinarian's office Wednesday.

At around 10:30 a.m., Phelps said, as she was walking down Novato Drive to her home, a boxer mix got loose and attacked her guide dog. A neighbor was dog-sitting the boxer mix and was keeping it in a garage, fenced in with a child-safety gate, according to Marcel Harnois, animal control director for north Solano County.

Phelps, being blind, could do nothing, though both she and the neighbor keeping the boxer mix yelled at the animals to stop.

Normally, a vicious-and-dangerous-dog hearing is required after such attacks. However, the owner of the attacking dog chose to have the boxer mix euthanized, Harnois said. The dog reportedly was in poor health.

"It's their choice. It's not something we can make them do," Harnois said.

While some victims might consider filing a lawsuit, the Phelpses said that isn't an option for them. "I'm not a vindictive man," said Roy Phelps, Diane's husband, who is also blind.

Josette will be out of work as a guide dog for at least two weeks, until the swelling from the attack subsides and she can wear a collar again, the Phelpses said.

If she continues her morning walks, Diane Phelps will use her white cane as a guide instead of Josette.

"It was a bad experience," Roy Phelps said. "We don't know what the long-term effects will be (on Josette)."

If the attack makes the lab skittish, she will have to be retired after seven years of serving as Diane Phelps' guide on walks. The guide dog school where Josette was trained has volunteered to pay the vet bills and see if the dog needs to be retired.

But retirement won't mean giving the dog up, the Phelpses said. "She's a member of the family," Diane Phelps said.

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