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NEWS

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Man questions police policy after son is bitten by dog

By Sven Berg
For the Times-News

BURLEY - Nate Zampedri says he always assumed dogs that bite, especially dogs that bite children, are put down. But when his 4-year-old son Karter was bitten recently by a relative's Akita, he discovered he was wrong.

After taking Karter to the hospital to treat bite marks on his nose and lip and claw marks to his chest, Zampedri contacted the Cassia County Sheriff's Office. Officer Mark Merrill took a report, but said dogs are not typically destroyed after biting for the first time. Zampedri said he was frustrated by the inaction.

"It really bothers me that this can happen to a 4-year-old boy and a police officer not do anything about it," he said. "If it were my dog, it would be put down immediately."

Calls to law enforcement officials throughout Mini-Cassia confirmed Merrill's claim. A dog must be determined to be "vicious" before legal action can be taken to destroy it. According to Idaho code, "any dog which, when not physically provoked, physically attacks, wounds, bites or otherwise injures any person who is not trespassing, is vicious."

After a second biting offense, a judge can order a vicious dog be destroyed. But city and county codes in Mini-Cassia do not mandate destruction after a first offense. For example, Heyburn's code states a vicious dog "may be destroyed by a peace officer," but only if the dog is "running at large" or cannot be captured without risking injury to humans.

Cassia County Undersheriff Cary Bristol said that most dogs, after biting a person, are quarantined for up to 15 days to ensure they do not carry a communicable disease such as rabies. Minidoka County Animal Control Officer Steve Mani said the same rule applies to Minidoka County, except that dogs are generally quarantined for only 10 days.

Mani said he and other law enforcement officers in the county can issue citations to owners whose dogs have bitten a person, but the decision is left to each officer.

"We look at all the circumstances before we issue somebody a citation," he said. "If a dog has bitten more than one person at any time then it goes before a judge, and if the judge deems it to be vicious then we euthanize the dog."

Bristol said owners are responsible for any damage their dogs cause, even if they are not considered vicious. But owners will face criminal charges if their dogs attack a human after being determined to be vicious.

Avoiding the bite

To avoid dog bites altogether, Bill Fulcher, owner of Ark Animal Hospital in Heyburn, suggests avoiding strange dogs. He also said many good dogs become vicious because they are tormented, often by children. He said it is unfortunately common for children to throw rocks at dogs that are chained or otherwise confined.

"They associate that with little people, and then when they get off they go hunting for little people," Fulcher said.

Fulcher said some breeds of dog tend to be more protective and less friendly to strangers, but not necessarily the breeds most people think are dangerous. He said Chihuahuas may be the meanest dogs in his experience, while pit bulls are more likely to "lick you to death."

"I would stay away from anything that has a chow in it," Fulcher said, noting that chows and Akitas are "cut from the same bolt of cloth. (Akitas) tend to be a little on the ornery side," he said. "They're kind of a one-family, one-person kind of dog."

Fulcher said when confronted by a strange dog, people should ignore it or speak to it in a firm voice to make it go away. In case of a dog bite, he said it is extremely important to report the attack to the police, because the attack itself may have been provoked by rabies.

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