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NORWOOD

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Another dog is exiled

State laws on pets to be updated

By Michele Morgan Bolton, Globe Correspondent | December 13, 2009

A spate of high-profile dog-biting incidents has prompted debate over appropriate punishment for aggressive pets, even as animal control officers and activists work to update a state law that defines dangerous dogs and how to deal with them.

Three biters were recently banished from their hometowns, one of them barely escaping euthanization. Lester, a bluetick coonhound, bit four people over four years on Nantucket, which - added to his constant howling - got him ordered permanently off the island this fall. Gabriella, an English mastiff, bit the wife of Red Sox pitcher Tim Wakefield and another woman at her owner's Hingham store and was exiled to upstate New York last month, after winning a reprieve from town officials.

And Hawk, a 3-year-old Belgian Malinois in Norwood, must leave that town by Jan. 3 after biting a 71-year-old woman who was walking on Mill Pond Lane. His owner had briefly left her yard to help one of her children and left the dog unattended.

Was the animals' misbehavior egregious enough for consideration of euthanization or banishment? Or, as some have argued, would retraining and muzzling, for example, have brought a fairer resolution for these family pets?

There are degrees of dangerousness, says Kara Holmquist, director of advocacy for the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. And if a dog is dangerous in one town, it is probably dangerous in a neighboring town, she said. So banishment may not be the best solution.

"Any dog can be dangerous if it doesn't receive socialization, training, or the proper supervision," Holmquist said. "Obviously, you don't want a dog to bite at all. The key for cities and towns is prevention."

State Senator Patricia D. Jehlen, a Somerville Democrat, is sponsoring legislation to revamp the state's dog laws, improve mandatory spay and neuter regulations, and more accurately define and strengthen the dangerous-dog ordinance without banning specific breeds.

It would also require all animal control officers to receive the same comprehensive training and create a statewide spay and neuter fund.

The Animal Control Officers Association of Massachusetts joined the MSPCA in helping to draft and amend the bill's language, as did the Massachusetts Veterinary Medical Association, the Animal Rescue League of Boston, and the state Bureau of Animal Health.

"A bunch of us finally said it's time to sit down and look at a lot of issues related to dangerous dogs in a well-thought-out manner," said Holmquist.

The bill was approved in the Senate in October and is now before the House Ways and Means Committee, which is expected to take up the legislation in the new year.

In Norwood, selectmen debated Hawk's fate for months as his family waited anxiously, finally deciding in late November to remove the dog from town.

The decision was traumatic for Colleen Padden, her husband, Christopher, who is a Norwood police officer, and their three sons.

Over the past three months, the family had Hawk assessed by animal behaviorist Nicholas Dodman, of the Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, whose report said Hawk's body language and posture are similar to many German shepherds "that in general are wonderful with family members but are often mistrusting of unfamiliar people."

The Paddens took responsibility and pledged to add more fencing to their yard, which already has a 6-foot stockade around part of it, but selectmen voted 3-2 to ban the dog. The family had until Dec. 4 to appeal the town's decision in district court, but eventually opted not to go that route.

"It's heart-wrenching for all of us," Colleen Padden said. "We love and trust him so much. The boys don't understand and they ask, 'Why can't we just move?' We are living on eggshells because it's hard to walk out the front door not knowing what people are thinking."

Selectman Tom McQuaid supported restricting the dog to its backyard and requiring the family to install an invisible fence.

"Certainly it was an unfortunate incident, and I understand why the woman was terrorized," he said. "I felt very badly for her. But the other side of the story is this family has three boys - 8, 10, and 12 - and that is their family pet. To banish, I thought, was a little excessive. You can't win."

But Selectwoman Helen Abdallah Donohue said the needs of humans have to supersede those of animals.

"It's unfair for someone to feel terrified and intimidated in their own neighborhood," she said. "An agency that places such dogs will find a suitable place for it."

But eventually that proved unnecessary.

In trying to decide what to do, the Padden family recently listed Hawk on a Malinois rescue site, and within 24 hours a former police canine officer in the Albany, N.Y., area contacted them, Colleen Padden said.

The former officer's family, with four children, a horse and a mule, and a dog similar to Hawk, lives on 4.5 acres, she said. Last Saturday, the man and his family visited the Paddens and after a two-hour-long visit, decided to adopt their dog.

It's a sad turn of events for the Paddens. But the thought of Hawk free to run in a big yard is comforting, too, said Colleen Padden. "Now we know where he is going, and that he will have a wonderful life."

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