

Pit bulls often get bad rap in court of public opinion

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Public opinion on pit bulls is definitely divided.

No one knows this better than Karen Bird, supervisor of the West Valley City Animal Shelter.

"People often accuse us of targeting pit bulls and their owners," she says. "That is not the case. Just like with any other breed, when we get a call of a pit bull running at large or biting someone, we are obligated to respond."

Bird says the numbers underscore the fact that many pit bull owners are failing to keep their dogs under control. She says the number of pit bulls impounded by the shelter jumped from 200 in 2003 to 350 in 2006. In the first five months of this year, 174 pit bulls were impounded - nearly 25 percent of the total dogs impounded by the shelter.

Between 10 and 15 pit bulls are on hand at the 36-kennel shelter on any given day. Bird says the shelter recently impounded 16 pit bulls in a single day.

That can make for cramped quarters at the facility. Further exacerbating matters, few people are interested in adopting pit bulls. Most people who are interested in pit bulls want to buy a puppy, not adopt an adult from the shelter.

Bird says pit bull owners are typically young males who want to own a "status symbol."

"It's not exactly the right motivation for adopting a dog," Bird says.

She adds that many people lose interest in adopting a pit bull when they find out that it must be sterilized first. This sends the signal that they intend to breed the dog.

"We need to put a stop to the backyard-breeding-to-make-a-buck mentality," Bird says. "There are so many pit bulls out there, we can't 100 percent avoid in-breeding, which causes a whole new set of problems."

Bird believes that most of the problems with pit bulls have been caused by the dogs' owners. She recommends professional training when the dogs are young.

"It's people who have given them a bad reputation," she says. "Helen Keller had a pit bull for heaven's sake."

Andrew Stehno, a professional dog trainer, agrees with Bird. He visits the shelter once a week and works at length training pit bulls. Stehno says it is important to expose pit bulls to people, children and other dogs at an early age.

"They are wonderful family dogs if they are properly socialized," he says. "One reason for that is, because pit bulls have a high tolerance for pain, and as kids yank on their tails and ears and climb on them, they are less likely to respond in a negative way. Pit bulls really are quite playful, they're obedient and want to please."

He notes there were 160 dog bites reported in West Valley City during 2006, 28 of which were from pit bulls and 26 from Labradors.

Dog bites "happens just as much" with other breeds, Stehno says.

Bird can't stress enough how important it is for people to take responsibility for their pets.

"Animal control is here for the safety and protection of our citizens and animals," she says. "Don't be afraid to call in a complaint or come to the shelter to look for your pet. Give us a chance to do our job, and don't criticize us when we do."

More on pit bulls

*** West Valley City residents can arrange to get their pit bulls sterilized at no cost by calling No More Homeless Pets in Utah at 801-364-0370, or by visiting the Web at www.utahpets.org/freefix.**

*** The West Valley City Animal Shelter is located at 4063 S. 7200 West. For more information about the shelter, call 801-965-5800. For tips about training pit bulls, call Andrew Stehno at 801-486-6007.**

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