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## Nethaway: Innocent dogs on death row

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Rowland Nethaway Senior editor

Destroying family pets based on pit-bill resemblance wrong

In America, people must be considered innocent until they are proven guilty.

In Denver, that constitutional right does not apply to man's best friend.

Denver officials are taking perfectly healthy, happy and innocent dogs away from their owners and killing them.

Assuming for the sake of argument that there is a difference between right and wrong, killing family pets that have never harmed a fly is wrong.

The only offense that earns a death sentence for these dogs is that they live in Denver with their human families and they look like pit bulls.

Nevermind that there is no such official breed as a pit bull, the Denver pit-bull ban authorizes animal control officers to confiscate any dog they think resembles a pit bull.

The dogs, according to an Associated Press story, are put on death row in the city's animal shelter where they are destroyed at an average of more than three a day.

Since a court decision upheld Denver's search-and-destroy pit bull ordinance, city animal control officers have rounded up more 380 dogs and have destroyed at least 260 family pets that have the appearance of pit bulls.

In 2004, the Colorado legislature approved a reasonable law that prohibited communities from passing breed-specific bans.

Denver officials fought the new law and finally prevailed when a judge ruled that the state law was an unconstitutional violation of local control.

Either leave town or hide the dog

Since then, Denver dog owners are confronted with the choice of finding a new home for their pets outside Denver or keeping any pet that may resemble a pit bull out of sight.

Any government policy that results in a specific group being forced to hide from authorities determined to round up and exterminate them based on appearances and demonization should ring a few alarm bells.

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Besides Denver, Miami and Cincinnati also ban pit bulls. No doubt other smaller communities do the same.

The problem with breed-specific bans is that it paints all the dogs of the specified breed as a threat to society. That is never the case.

In the case of pit bulls, the term loosely describes American Staffordshire Terriers, Staffordshire Bull Terriers and the American Pit Bull Terrier. Denver's ordinance applies to any dog that resembles any three of these breeds of dogs.

All three of these breeds are described by experts with words such as friendly, even-tempered, gentle, stoic, affectionate to people and courageous. They also are described as potentially aggressive toward other dogs, especially those of the same sex.

As everyone knows, pit bulls occasionally attack people, as do dogs of all breeds, including mixed breeds. Most dog attacks do little damage and are unreported. Because of their size and the power of their bites, pit bulls can inflict severe damage when they attack people. In some cases, pit bulls and other large dogs kill people.

Experts at the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention who research dog bites report there is no scientific data to support breed-bans that claim any one dog is more likely to kill.

According to the American Canine Foundation, pit bull breeds bite at a lower rate than many other breeds. Doberman pinschers bite 10 times as often as pit bulls. No one cares how often people are bitten by Chihuahuas.

The biting risk of any dog involves many factors, according to the experts, including how the dog was raised and treated, and even by its health.

But because of their size and perhaps their prey instincts, pit bulls and Rottweillers are responsible for the most deaths to people.

More reasonable animal-control ordinances should come down hard on people who abuse their pets and should target individual dogs that demonstrate dangerous aggression.

Just because Denver can legally round up and kill innocent dogs does not make it right.

Rowland Nethaway's column appears Wednesday and Friday. E-mail: RNethaway@wacotrib.com

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