

Vet: Laws must target owners, not pit bulls

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Despite recent attacks by three pit bull terriers near Cary, and numerous other Chicago-area maulings from the breed, a Rolling Meadows veterinarian says banning these dogs is not the way to reduce these incidents.

Dr. Joanne Carlson, president of Chicago Veterinary Medical Association, believes instead that a more stringent law that penalizes the owners of overly aggressive dogs is a better solution.

Carlson said the bad behavior of pit bulls, particularly non-neutered males, is largely a result of how their owners socialize them.

"Yes, pit bulls tend to be assertive and, therefore, very confident in their behavior, which is why they need special training," she said.

"Breed-specific legislation does not diminish dog attacks, but only changes the breed of dog causing the attacks. It's really just a Band-Aid to the problem. And we need to focus more on educating people about pet safety," said Carlson, owner of Loving Care Animal Clinic, 2633 Kirchoff Road.

"But I do feel a ban will progress into the suburbs." While pet control laws varies among states and local governments, Carlson said the Illinois Animal Control Act holds pet owners liable for injuries that victims suffer in an attack. However, she added violating the act is only a misdemeanor.

"I think a lot less people would not ignore the Animal Control Act if they knew a felony would be on their permanent records," she said.

Under the animal Control Act, plaintiffs must prove four points to gain compensation for injuries from owners; the animal must be owned by the defendant; a lack of provocation from the victim; peaceable conduct of the person attacked and the person had a right to be in the place where the attack occurred.

A dog owner who violates the act must pay at least \$100, have the dog spayed or neutered, and have a microchipped implanted in the animal so as to help find and identify it if lost. Owners who fail to comply are fined \$500.

State Rep. Michael Tryon, R-64th, who represents the area where the Cary attack took place Nov. 5, has filed breed-specific state legislation for pit bills and rotweillers.

His proposals automatically define those breeds as dangerous and raises fines for attacks to \$1,000. In addition, should a death result in an attack from those animals, a convicted owner could be charged with a Class Four felony for negligent homicide and receive up to a five-year prison sentence.

"If you treat dogs as all being equal, then there is no incentive to be extra cautious with certain dogs. About eight different breeds make up 90 percent of people getting hurt," Tryon said.

In Chicago, 19th Ward Alderman Ginger Rugai proposed a ban on American pit bull terriers, American staffordshire terriers and any dogs with their bloodlines.

Current owners would not have to disown their animals, but Rugai's ordinance requires to spay and neuter them, implant microchips and obtain licenses.

If caught owning a pit bull, a person could be fined \$1,000 and jailed for six months. Chicago's Licensing Committee is reviewing Rugai's ordinance, and Peggy Rafferty, the alderman's spokeswoman, said the Chicago City Council could vote on the measure after Jan. 1

In 2003, pit bulls killed one woman and attacked another woman who fought them off in Dan Ryan Woods, which is in Rugai's far South Side Chicago ward.

According to the Northwest Municipal Conference in Des Plaines, a regional intergovernmental council of 46 municipalities and four townships, of the 21 villages that responded to their survey asking whether they had breed-specific ordinances, only two -- Antioch and Hoffman Estates -- have regulations.

Mark Fowler, executive director the Municipal Conference, said although regulating certain breeds was not as topical as a suburban ban on smoking, some villages have requested his organization to survey villages on banning particular canines.

"That is how subjects like this bubble to the top of a village's agenda. They want research surveys from us to see what their neighbors are doing," Fowler said.

Carlson said pit bulls most often bite children under 12 because they get too close to dogs who are not familiar with them.

"Kids come to play and the first thing they do is hug the dog, and they feel threatened and overreact. Give the dog space at first and don't pet them on the head or tail. Pet gently along their sides," said Carlson, who also has been featured in educational videos showing pet safety and responsibility.