

The Coalition for Living Safely with Dogs exists to promote understanding of the human and animal behaviors that impact community safety and to reframe the civic conversation about dangerous dogs.

Strategies for Safer Communities

On March 8, 2006, 75 people participated in a forum on community strategies for dealing with dangerous dogs—symbolizing the spirit of partnership between organizations and institutions that care about animals and people. Managing dangerous dogs is a complex issue within a metropolitan area where municipalities have overlapping issues and mutual needs. Sponsored by the Coalition for Living Safely with Dogs, the Animal Assistance Foundation, and the University of Denver, the forum was an initial step in working on a well-planned community approach to a critical and complex issue that is facing municipalities in Colorado and around the nation. The goal of the forum was to initiate a broad-based dialogue to affect municipal rule-making because what happens in one community impacts other communities.

Participants representing 21 Front Range jurisdictions and 18 local, state, and national veterinary and humane organizations came together for mutual fact finding, understanding, and clarification. These participants included animal control officers, city and town council members, other law enforcement personnel, municipal attorneys, animal behaviorists, and animal health and welfare professionals. Feedback from the participants indicated that the forum met a critical need and provided a productive setting for collaboration.



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The facts and opinions offered by forum speakers created a multi-faceted context in which participants were made aware of the broad range of factors impacting this issue. No one perspective is a sufficient lens through which the problem of dangerous dogs can be thoroughly understood and resolved. The following were the perspectives discussed at the forum:

Competing Laws

- o City and state laws may or may not be complementary. Where they are competing, municipalities are confused about what to do.

Inconsistent Law Enforcement/ Limitations on Law Enforcement

- o Consequences vary widely in the administration of justice in dangerous dog cases, sending ambiguous messages to animal owners.
- o Law enforcement usually does not have authority for addressing dogs in the pre-dangerous designation; there is no law that permits officers to deal with the intermediate signs of aggression.

Relationships Between People and Their Dogs

- o Relationships between people and their dogs have changed as lifestyles and culture have changed. No longer is a dog considered a work dog by most owners in an urban setting; more often a dog is considered part of the family or even a furry child.
- o Even though we are treating dogs more like people, they can only react as dogs (and that includes biting, in some circumstances).

Data

- o Data available on dog bites and attacks are often inconsistent or incomplete and therefore of little or no use in guiding municipalities that are striving to deal with dangerous dog issues. No central dog bite repository exists in Colorado so the prevalence and circumstances of bites is unknown, and there are many questions still unanswered:
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Breeding

- o Animal professionals can identify predispositions in breeds, but those predispositions can be modified by owners' leadership and the care of an individual dog.
- o Even breeds traditionally regarded as good family dogs or good with children can be dangerous given the "right" circumstances.

Homeowners' Insurance

- o Some homeowners' and renters' policies have breed exclusions on the coverage of bite claims, some policies exclude coverage of all bites.
- o Some insurance companies refuse coverage at all if the applicant owns one of the company's "banned" breeds.
- o There is no consistency within the industry on the subject of dangerous dogs.

Real Estate Impact

- o Landlords and property managers are becoming enforcers of breed ordinances by default. They are having to guess at what looks like a banned animal.

Media

- o When the media report on dog attacks they tend to sensationalize without presenting the circumstances of the attack so that the reader/viewer is left to blame the dog.

Policy Makers' Perspective

- o Municipalities want solutions that are practical, neat, quick, and simple. According to one city manager, those solutions are never very good, but they are usually pretty fast. Municipalities have to be more pragmatic than philosophical in their solutions.

- o According to a city council member, cities are concerned with the health, safety, and welfare of all people, as well as their rights. Cities worry about the “push-around” effect, one city’s ban impacting the surrounding communities.

Community-Based Approaches

- o According to keynote speaker, Christian Molitor, Ph.D., Associate Dean of the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work, as a society we often limit our responses to complex, deep-rooted problems to surface interventions

only, interventions that sweep the problem out of sight instead of attempt to solve the problem. Breed bans are an example of an intervention that does that.

- o We need multiple strategies across disciplines to get at complex, deep-rooted problems. In the case of negligent and abusive people owning dangerous dogs, removing the dog will not change the owner’s anger or hostility toward his or her community. Intervention of the animal care community and the human services community is required.

The working session concluded with forum participants engaged in dialogue on the topics of “what we know” and “what we do not know yet.” Future activities of the coalition will be informed by these topics.

WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW YET

- o What are the specific factors that create a dangerous dog? Of those factors, what is attributable to the natural instinct of the dog and what is attributable to the owner?
- o Are breed bans working?
- o Should dangerous dog laws be at the state or municipal level or both? If both, how can they work together?
- o How many dogs are there (by breed)?
- o What are the statistics on incidence, prevalence, and circumstances of bites/attacks?
- o Does free choice, testing boundaries, or other types of lenient behaviors by owners contribute to a dog’s violent behavior?
- o Who is a dangerous dog owner? What is the psychology of a dangerous dog owner?
- o Do owners of dangerous dogs (of banned breeds) move? Do they change breeds in order to still have a dangerous dog?

The coalition recognizes the complexity of this issue, the need for a community-wide approach, and the commitment that will be required to make progress toward better solutions. We seek to move beyond surface interventions like breed-specific restrictions to discussion of more comprehensive strategies that address both the human and animal behaviors that can heighten (or diminish, if left unchecked) the safety and well-being of our communities.

ABOUT THE FORUM'S SPONSORS

Coalition for Living Safely with Dogs

Founded in the fall of 2005, the coalition is comprised of professionals representing Colorado animal health, care, and control organizations. The coalition exists to promote understanding of the human and animal behaviors that impact community safety and to reframe the civic conversation about dangerous dogs. The coalition seeks to educate dog owners about responsible pet ownership, inform citizens about their rights and responsibilities in making communities safer, and assist municipalities in establishing and enforcing new or more effective dangerous dog laws. Member organizations are All Breed Rescue Network (ABRN), Animal Assistance Foundation (AAF), Colorado Association of Animal Control Officers (CAACO), Colorado Association of Certified Veterinary Technicians (CACVT), Colorado Federation of Animal Welfare Agencies (CFAWA), Colorado Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA), Denver Area Veterinary Medical Society (DAVMS), Metro Denver Shelter Alliance (MDSA), and Summerlee Foundation.

Animal Assistance Foundation

The purpose of the Denver-based foundation is to foster a culture that provides good stewardship of animals. The foundation seeks to enhance the understanding of the relationship between human beings and animals for the betterment of both.

University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work

The Graduate School of Social Work is the new home for the Institute for Human-Animal Connection, to be launched in the fall. The program is based upon a growing body of research into the therapeutic application and use of the human-animal bond.

For the full-length *Report of the March 8, 2006 Forum*, please request it at D_Dog@aaf-fd.org.