



Position Paper on Aggressive Dogs

Submitted to the Mayor's Working Group on Aggressive Dogs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Successfully dealing with the problem of aggressive dogs in San Francisco will require a concerted, comprehensive, multi-agency effort. There is no quick fix. A comprehensive solution will require significant outreach to all communities in San Francisco – dog breeders, trainers, educators, parents, children, seniors, physicians, veterinarians, and people with and without dogs, including all ethnicities and socioeconomic groups. San Francisco can and should craft a response to the problems of aggressive dogs that sets an example for the rest of the country.

SFDOG recommends that San Francisco adopt a multi-faceted approach:

1. **SPAYING/NEUTERING/BREEDING** – Irresponsible dog breeders must be stopped. This includes people who breed dogs to be aggressive and people who do not consider temperament and inherited health problems when breeding their dog. Cracking down on irresponsible breeders has benefits that stretch far beyond aggression. It will help stamp out inherited health problems in dogs and ease overpopulation problems. Requiring a permit for responsible breeders seems reasonable. A concerted effort to encourage spaying/neutering is a good first step, especially in those communities with many problem dogs and without easy access to veterinary care. Mandatory requirements should be considered, as long as adequate protections are in place for responsible breeders, show dogs, and dogs for whom spaying/neutering holds health risks (as determined by a licensed veterinarian). Further research of cities and communities that have mandatory spaying/neutering is needed, to study its effectiveness and look for adverse unintended consequences (such as reduced licensing compliance). San Francisco should consider adding a “sunset” provision to any legislation mandating spaying/neutering.
2. **EDUCATION** – A concerted effort by San Francisco to educate its citizens about dog safety is essential. Information about breed characteristics and dog behavior is crucial for dog owners, so they can make an informed choice of a dog breed that is appropriate for their families and lifestyles, and so that people can spot warning signs in their dog’s behavior. Because children are at most risk, dog safety programs should be required in schools and afterschool programs. Parents need to know how to ensure their children are safe around dogs. Seniors need to learn how to socialize their dogs to children, so there are no problems when their grandkids come to visit. We need educational materials prepared in languages other than English, especially Spanish and Chinese. To reach more people, programs on dog behavior and training could be aired on SFGTV. Special outreach is needed to

communities where aggressive dogs are most common. The issue of how to get information to people who think they don't need it is one that will require further study.

3. **TRAINING** – The hallmark of being a responsible dog owner is having control over your dog. Training is essential for every dog in San Francisco and should be encouraged as much as possible. Dog training should be as much a part of our culture as is education for our children. Low-cost training and training in languages other than English, especially Spanish and Chinese are sorely needed. ACC could catalog complaints about bad trainers, in much the same way that the Better Business Bureau monitors business practices. Mandatory training will most likely not work, as it is costly and difficult to enforce.
4. **BREED BANS** – Studies have shown that breed-specific bans do not stop the problem of aggressive dogs. The kind of irresponsible people who want/have aggressive dogs or use them for illegal purposes just switch to a different, unbanned breed. A breed ban raises more questions than it answers: What percentage of mixed breed pit bulls will be banned? Who determines if a mixed breed dog has enough pit bull in it to be banned? Do you go door to door and confiscate family pets? Will confiscated dogs be euthanized, even if they have never shown a sign of aggression and are well trained? Breed bans are essentially unenforceable, even if they would work. But they don't.
5. **ENFORCEMENT/ADEQUATE RECREATION** – The City should continue to crack down on dog fighting and on gang members, drug dealers, and other criminals who use aggressive dogs to protect their turf or drugs, or in other criminal activity. Proposals to prohibit people convicted of certain crimes, especially if vicious dogs played a part in the criminal activity, from owning dogs should be studied. We have to figure out ways to change the perception within some communities that aggressive dogs are “cool,” “macho,” etc. Research has consistently shown that dogs that are well exercised and well socialized are much less aggressive. Any serious attempt to prevent aggressive behavior in dogs has to include providing adequate space for off-leash recreation.
6. **INFRASTRUCTURE** – A comprehensive approach to the problem of aggressive dogs requires a high level of coordination between City agencies, dog-oriented non-profits, and the private sector. Should ACC be designated as the coordinating agency, it will need increased funding and staffing to handle the additional responsibilities. It is crucial that we develop a citywide approach to the problem of aggressive dogs. But a truly effective policy cannot be identified in just ten days. More research clearly needs to be done and that, unfortunately, takes time. An on-going working group, perhaps under the aegis of the Animal Control and Welfare Commission, can coordinate this research and ensure policies developed are sound and effective.

Recent events have shocked and saddened us all. Dealing with the issue of aggressive dogs is something we should address. The worst thing we could do, however, is to develop regulations or restrictions that are ineffective, unenforceable, unfair, or wildly unpopular. If we do that, we'll be lulled into a false sense of security when, in fact, we've not addressed the real issues. Rushing into a policy while emotions are still high can result in bad policy. Ten days is not long enough to study the problem of aggressive dogs. We urge that more research be done, to ensure that anything decided upon will be effective, enforceable, fair, and popular. Such research could be completed in a timeframe of three to six months. Members of the Working Group should put any proposed legislation through a test – How would the proposed legislation have prevented the most recent maulings and deaths? If the proposed legislation would not have prevented the attacks, it should be reconsidered.

Dogs are an important part of the San Francisco community. The Ohlone people shared their lives with dogs, so, in a very real sense, dogs have been in San Francisco longer than anyone descended from colonial settlers. Dogs provide aid and comfort to the young, the elderly, the sick, and the disabled. They are beloved family pets. The vast majority do not – and never will – cause harm to humans or other animals. While any dog mauling is a tragedy, especially for the families involved, we must acknowledge that dog fatalities are rare occurrences. San Francisco has 60% fewer dog bites than the national average, and the number of dog bites has dropped significantly in recent years.

As individuals, as a community, and as a City, we need to address the problems caused by aggressive dogs in San Francisco. But we need to do it in ways that actually solve the problem, not just respond with shortsighted policies. SFDOG is ready and willing to help in any way we can.

A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO DEALING WITH AGGRESSIVE DOGS

There is no quick fix for the problems caused by aggressive dogs. In 2001, the American Veterinary Medical Association published a report from its Task Force on Canine Aggression and Human-Canine Interactions. The first paragraph of the report, titled “A community approach to dog bite prevention,” states:

“Following a severe attack, there is usually an outcry to do something, and the something that is done often reflects a knee-jerk response. Only later do officials realize that the response was not effective and, in fact, may have been divisive for the community.”
(JAVMA, Vol. 218, No. 11, June 1, 2001, p. 1733, <http://avma.org/pubhlth/dogbite/dogbite.pdf>).

Those of us in San Francisco would do well to remember these words as we struggle to develop a policy on aggressive dogs in the wake of the tragic death of Nicholas Faibish.

Successfully dealing with the problem will require a concerted, comprehensive, multi-agency effort. This is not just a law enforcement problem. It cannot be resolved by taking any one, single action. Again quoting from the first paragraph of the AVMA report:

“Although the number of injuries will never be reduced to zero, Task Force members believe a well-planned proactive community approach can make a substantial impact.” (JAVMA, Vol. 218, No. 11, June 1, 2001, p. 1733)

If any good can come from the recent incident, it may be that it spurred the community to look beyond a quick fix and develop a truly comprehensive approach to dog safety. San Francisco can – and should – craft humane policies that set an example for the rest of the country.

San Francisco already has legislation aimed at dogs that have been identified as vicious or dangerous (San Francisco Health Code, section 42). This process is initiated when a dog bites or shows overt signs of aggression toward people or other animals. The concern addressed by this Working Group is how to stop aggression before a dog gets into this system. This Working Group is looking at what can be done proactively to prevent severe dog attacks.

SFDOG strongly feels that, in order to be effective, any policy must have a multi-faceted approach – spaying/neutering, education, and training. Focusing on only one of these areas will result in an incomplete and ultimately ineffective policy. We encourage a comprehensive, multi-agency approach to dealing with aggressive dogs.

SPAYING/NEUTERING/BREEDING

According to the AVMA report:

“Intact (unneutered) male dogs represented 80% of dogs presented to veterinary behaviorists for dominance aggression, the most commonly diagnosed type of aggression. Intact males are also involved in 70 to 76% of reported dog bite incidents.” (p. 1733).

Clearly, unspayed and unneutered dogs represent a major risk factor for aggression. Responsible adults aware of this who work hard to control their dogs can prevent incidents of aggression. But the City should not depend on owner vigilance to reduce the problems of aggressive dogs.

Spaying/neutering must be highly encouraged. There are health benefits to spaying/neutering, including reduced cancer risks as well as a decrease in aggression. San Francisco already has differential licensing fees, with increased fees for intact dogs. Such programs have proven effective in increasing numbers of altered dogs, especially when combined with concerted outreach efforts about the health and behavior benefits of spaying/neutering. Programs, such as those offered by the SF SPCA and ACC that offer monetary incentives to dog owners, especially pit bull owners, to spay/neuter their pets are also effective. A 1999 poll of 517 Los Angeles pet owners, commissioned by Humane America, found “unaltered pets tend to belong to the people with the lowest incomes, who have the least access to services in their own language and part of town, and also have the least pet-keeping experience.” (Animal People, May 2000, <http://www.animalpeoplenews.org/editorialMay5.00.html>). A concerted outreach effort to all ethnicities and socioeconomic groups, especially when done in languages other than English where needed, is critical to increasing the numbers of altered dogs.

Mandatory spaying/neutering should be considered for all dogs of a certain age (18 months to 2 years, to accommodate different growth rates in different breeds) in San Francisco, as long as adequate protections are in place for responsible breeders and for show dogs (which must be intact to be shown). In addition, exceptions should be given to dogs that, in the opinion of a licensed veterinarian, will suffer adverse health effects if they are spayed/neutered. Low-cost spaying/neutering must be provided for low-income dog owners through either ACC or other dog health providers like the SF SPCA. If enough low-cost procedures are not available, low-income populations may be unable to comply with the requirement. But mandatory spaying/neutering requirements raise some questions: Who will pay to subsidize the low-cost procedures? What do we do if people, especially lower-income residents, refuse to or cannot pay large fines for noncompliance? Will we confiscate family pets of low-income people for non-payment of fines? Canvassing neighborhoods to ensure compliance will be both time-intensive and expensive. Are we willing to expend the money and effort needed to ensure compliance? If not, why institute it? Have communities with mandatory requirements seen improvements in aggression? Have there been any adverse, unintended consequences of the requirements (such as decreased licensing compliance)? We

should thoroughly investigate these issues before implementing mandatory spaying/neutering. Such research could be completed in a timeframe of three to six months.

San Francisco could consider including “sunset” provisions with any legislation mandating spaying/neutering. These provisions will allow a reconsideration of mandatory spaying/neutering after some period of time (maybe five or ten years) to ensure the program is effective and has not had unintended consequences, such as fewer people licensing their dog to avoid the spay/neuter requirements (as has happened in some cities).

There should be some process whereby responsible breeders can become exempt from spay/neuter requirements. Perhaps they can be exempted if they met a number of basic criteria, for example:

- 1) OFA certifications/testing and/or breed-appropriate genetic testing
- 2) History of regular veterinary care
- 3) Involvement in training with a professional dog trainer
- 4) Involvement in dog shows and other competitions (e.g., agility) or organized trials (hunting, tracking, etc.)
- 5) Registry with one or more governing bodies (AKC, UKC, or FCI)
- 6) Membership/involvement with one or more clubs, associations or organizations specific to their breed of choice
- 7) Agreements with people who get puppies to spay/neuter dogs that are not show quality
- 8) Temperament tests of all intact dogs

SFDOG is not specifically endorsing or recommending these specific criteria. They are presented here to illustrate the idea that there are ways to distinguish responsible breeders from irresponsible ones. More research would have to be conducted to determine which criteria the City would adopt. Such research could be completed in a timeframe of three to six months.

Irresponsible and non-professional (“backyard”) dog breeders must be stopped. This includes people who breed dogs for aggressive tendencies, and people who do not consider sound temperament and inherited health problems when breeding their dog. It also includes people who say they want their dog to have a litter of puppies so their kids can see the miracle of birth, or so that their dog can have a “full life.” Cracking down on irresponsible breeders has benefits that stretch beyond preventing aggression. Responsible breeding can help eliminate or reduce genetic problems (e.g., eye problems, deafness, hip dysplasia, etc.), improving the overall health of dogs. It also directly addresses our serious pet overpopulation problems.

Requiring responsible breeders to get a permit seems reasonable. As part of the permit process, breeders could be required to attend a workshop on genetics to ensure they understand inherited health problems. Breeders could bypass the workshop if they can prove their understanding, perhaps by passing a test (similar to a driver’s license test). Responsible breeders should be given a list of common genetic

problems found in different dog breeds, a Breeder's Code of Ethics, and AKC Breed Standard for their breed of choice when they obtain a permit.

Any dogs that have spent time in the custody of Animal Care and Control should not be released to their owners without being spayed or neutered, unless the dog is otherwise exempted. This requirement could also be waived under special circumstances (for example, the dog was stolen from the home, or workers opened a door and accidentally let the dog out). Intact dogs released by ACC could be subject to some restrictions. For example, ACC could require stronger fences in the yard of a show dog that escaped from a backyard. More research is needed on the feasibility of this idea and the burden it would place on ACC. Such research could be completed on a timeframe of three to six months.

The vicious and dangerous dog hearings process already addresses the issue of intact dogs that show aggressive behavior in public. The hearing officer can require spaying/neutering of dogs that appear in his court.

EDUCATION

San Francisco has never made a concerted effort to educate its citizens about dog safety. Organizations such as SFDOG, the SF SPCA, and ACC offer educational programs, but there is little coordination of efforts between the city and these groups. Facilitating communication and coordination between groups offering educational programs about dog behavior and dog safety should be a hallmark of any comprehensive policy. Some people may say that now is not the time for education. If not now, when? Some may say that education hasn't worked. What they're really saying is that San Francisco's up-to-now piecemeal approach has not worked. We actually agree. It is clearly long past time for San Francisco to develop a concerted, coordinated effort to educate all citizens about dog safety. SFDOG is willing to play an important role in coordinating and offering education programs for both dog owners and non-dog people in San Francisco.

The AVMA Task Force report says, "Education is key to reducing dog bites within a community." (p. 1739). An obvious target for educational outreach is children. According to the AVMA report:

"Seventy percent of fatal dog attacks and more than half of bite wounds requiring medical attention involve children... The most vulnerable youngsters are 5- to 9-year old boys, but smaller children can also be seriously injured... Children's natural behaviors, including running, yelling, grabbing, hitting, quick and darting movements, and maintaining eye contact, put them at risk for dog bite injuries." (p. 1741).

There is no excuse for San Francisco not providing dog safety classes for its children. The SF SPCA has a "Dog Talk" program that teaches young children about dog behavior and also shows them how to act

around an unfamiliar dog to avoid being bitten. SFDOG has tried for over a year to interest the Recreation and Park Department in organizing “Dog Talk” programs for its afterschool and summer day camp programs, with little success. If any good comes from the recent tragedy, it may be that all children will learn how to be safe around dogs. The AVMA report also argues that, “It is critical that school administrators buy into the concept of a dog bite prevention program.” (p. 1742). When children are educated about dogs, they are less likely to be bitten.

Adults, especially parents and those who are active in outdoor activities (joggers, bicyclists, etc), are also important consumers for educational outreach. Adult versions of the SPCA’s “Dog Talk” program are needed. “All adults should learn appropriate behaviors around dogs so that they can protect themselves, teach their own children, serve as an example for others, and reinforce appropriate behaviors in other children at every opportunity.” (AVMA report, p, 1742). The report further suggests that educational materials for adults be sent home with school children, distributed by pediatricians during well-child visits, and inserted into utility bills, to reach the largest possible number of adults.

Senior citizens are more susceptible to injury and disease as they age. Grandparents and seniors with dogs may not realize that their dogs, who spend almost all their time with adults, may not be completely trustworthy around young children. “Dogs not raised around small children or not frequently exposed to them may not be socialized toward them.” (AVMA report, p. 1742). Information on programs that socialize dogs to young children can be distributed through senior centers, church groups, visiting nurse and meals-on-wheels programs, and the media. The programs themselves can be offered through many of the same places, and through private and nonprofit dog-oriented organizations.

Education is perhaps most critical for dog owners themselves. Open Paw, an East Bay nonprofit (www.openpaw.org), offers educational materials designed to educate prospective dog owners BEFORE they get their pet. It’s critical that dog owners understand the characteristics of the breed of dog they are considering before actually bringing one home. For example, if you don’t have the time or interest to play fetch for an hour every day, don’t get a border collie. Better matching of personality, ability, experience, and lifestyle will cut down on behavior problems in dogs and reduce the numbers of dogs turned over to shelters because they don’t “fit” in with the family. San Francisco should expand educational outreach to prospective dog owners, for example, through “Selecting a New Dog” programs offered at recreation centers and through private and nonprofit dog organizations.

Educating dog owners about dog behavior is similarly critical. Dog owners need to know the warning signs of developing aggression in their dog, and learn how to correct any aggression before it becomes a major problem. For example, dog behaviorists have pointed out that aggression often first appears in dogs between the ages of 18 months and two years. Dog owners should be especially aware of their

dog's behavior at that time. SFDOG has developed a workshop for dog owners that addresses common behavior problems (e.g., not coming when called) and shows owners how to correct them. We have offered programs to socialize dogs to horses. We hope to offer programs to socialize dogs to joggers, bicycles, skateboards, and rollerblades. But we are an all-volunteer nonprofit, without paid staff or a large budget. Partnerships between groups such as SFDOG and the Recreation and Parks Department, ACC, and the SF SPCA could go a long way to ensure educational programs for dog owners are common and affordable.

Finally, dog owners have to understand what it means to be a responsible dog owner. Responsible dog ownership means always having your dog under control. It means always picking up after your dog. It means being considerate of others when you are out with your dog. SFDOG has published flyers, newsletters, and other material about responsible dog ownership. Making such information available at recreation centers, dog play areas, ACC, and dog-oriented groups and businesses will help spread the word to even more people.

Programs on dog training and dog safety can be aired on SFGTV, to reach even more people. Education is an important part of a multi-pronged approach to dealing with aggressive dogs. The more people know, the better they can protect themselves, their children, and their dogs.

TRAINING

The hallmark of a responsible dog owner is having control over your dog. Training is essential for every dog in San Francisco and should be encouraged as much as possible. Two factors that keep people from taking advantage of training programs are cost and availability. San Francisco needs to provide low-cost, neighborhood training classes, whether through recreation centers or in partnership with dog-oriented nonprofits and other interest groups. Training in languages other than English, especially Spanish and Chinese, is sorely lacking and critically needed.

We also have to ensure that the people teaching dog training classes know what they're doing. Classes taught by people with a poor understanding of dog behavior might do more harm than good. ACC could catalog complaints about bad trainers, in much the same way that the Better Business Bureau monitors business practices.

Mandatory training is more problematic. If training is mandatory, should the content of training classes be standardized? Who will oversee the development of training standards? What about the different training methods? Will only one be accepted? What about dog owners who train their dogs themselves? How do

they prove their dog is under control? Who will subsidize training for low-income dog owners? Mandatory training will most likely not work.

Training is not something you do only when a dog is a puppy. Being a responsible dog owner means working with your dog throughout its life to reinforce its training.

ENFORCEMENT/ADEQUATE RECREATION

Many aggressive dogs are bred and/or trained for dogfights. The City should continue to crack down on dogfights and on gang members, drug dealers, and other criminals who use dogs in their illegal activity. There has been talk of banning people convicted of certain crimes (gang activity, drug dealing, etc), especially if the crimes involved aggressive dogs (e.g., a vicious dog was protecting turf or drugs), from owning dogs for a certain amount of time. This idea is worth further consideration, but also requires more research as to its effectiveness, how it would be enforced, and to address any constitutional issues raised. We have to figure out ways to change the perception within some communities that aggressive dogs are “cool,” “macho”, etc. This will involve a concerted educational effort and will not be simple or easy.

Concentrating law enforcement resources on these criminal problem areas makes more sense than wasting limited resources ticketing off-leash dogs that are well behaved and not misbehaving. Leash laws were not an issue in either the Whipple or the Faibish dog maulings. Research has consistently shown that dogs that are well exercised and well socialized are much less aggressive. According to “Benefits of Off-Leash Recreation”, published by the SF SPCA in 2002:

“Dogs must have exercise, and that means regular off-leash play. Walks on a leash are nice, and dogs certainly enjoy getting out and sniffing around. But a walk on a leash is not exercise. Exercise means exertion. It means running off-leash and playing with other dogs. In an urban environment like San Francisco, most dog behavior problems can be traced to lack of exercise. Without sufficient exercise, dogs get bored and frustrated. They develop common behavior problems, like barking, chewing, jumpiness, and even aggression.”

Under-socialized dogs, that is, those kept separate from other dogs and deprived of exercise and regular contact with friendly strangers in a safe setting, are at greater risk for aggression. Any serious attempt to prevent aggressive behavior in dogs has to include providing adequate space for off-leash recreation.

San Francisco already has regulations to deal with dogs that have been identified as vicious or dangerous (San Francisco Health Code, section 42). While we should devote every effort to prevent dogs from acting aggressively, the City has a system in place to deal with them if they do. This system seems

to work well. The hearing officer has the ability to require training, muzzling, neutering, and even euthanasia, if warranted.

BREED-SPECIFIC BANS

Study after study has shown that breed-specific bans do not stop the problem of aggressive dogs.

Quoting from the report of the AVMA Task Force on Canine Aggression:

“Concerns about ‘dangerous’ dogs have caused many local governments to consider supplementing existing animal control laws with ordinances directed toward control of specific breeds or types of dogs. Members of the Task Force believe such ordinances are inappropriate and ineffective.” (p. 1736)

The Humane Society of the United States, in a position paper on breed-specific policies, says:

“Communities that have banned specific breeds have discovered that it has not been the easy answer they thought it would be.” (the report can be accessed at:

www.hsus.org/pets/issues_affecting_our_pets/dangerous_dogs.html).

The HSUS position paper also quotes a study in the September 2000 Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, which studied dog bite fatalities in the US from 1979 to 1998:

“The main conclusion of the study was that breed-specific legislation doesn’t work for several reasons: that there are inherent problems in trying to determine a dog’s breed, making enforcement of breed-specific legislation difficult at best; that fatal attacks represent a very small portion of bite-related injuries and should not be the major factor driving public policy; and that existing non-breed-specific legislation already exists and offers promise for the prevention of dog bites.”

And

“Unfortunately, the ‘problem dog’ at any given time is often the most popular breed among individuals who tend to be irresponsible, if not abusive, in the control and keeping of their pets. Simply put, if you ban one breed, individuals will just move on to another one. Banning a breed only speeds up the timetable.”

(www.hsus.org/pets/issues_affecting_our_pets/dangerous_dogs.html).

Breed-specific bans raise many questions. If you ban pit bulls, what percentage of pit bull is allowed in a mixed breed dog before it too is banned? One-quarter pit bull? Even the slightest amount? The vast majority of the public (and even most professionals) are not able to accurately identify any but the most common dog breeds. Very few can accurately identify the many different “bully breeds” most commonly affected by breed bans. What do you do about existing pit bulls? Do you go door to door and confiscate family pets? Who will pay for the sheltering of confiscated dogs? Will confiscated dogs be euthanized just because of their breed, even if they have never shown a sign of aggression and are well trained?

Breed-specific bans in San Francisco will not increase public safety significantly. They could lead to a false sense that we have addressed the problem of aggressive dogs, when we have not. Therefore, there is no justification for trying to overturn the California State ban on breed-specific legislation.

INFRASTRUCTURE

The report of the AVMA Task Force on Canine Aggression recommends developing a comprehensive community effort to deal with aggressive dogs:

“Reducing the incidence of dog bites requires the cooperation of many groups, including animal control agencies, the human and veterinary medical communities, educators, departments of health, and the local licensing authority. Open and consistent communication is an integral part of an effective program, and one entity should be designated as the coordinating agency. A logical coordinating agency would be the health department or animal control.” (p. 1735).

Should ACC be designated as the coordinating agency for a comprehensive, multi-agency effort to address the problem of aggressive dogs, they will need more funding and personnel to handle the additional responsibilities. Every proposed solution, from neutering laws to education to training, requires some sort of investment. That investment may be in the form of City services (ACC) or in the form of grants to non-municipal organizations like the SF SPCA or SFDOG.

It is crucial that we develop a comprehensive approach to the problem of aggressive dogs. A truly effective policy cannot be identified and adequately researched in just ten days. More research clearly needs to be done, and that, unfortunately, takes time. Setting a timeframe of three to six months to complete needed research seems reasonable. The concept of the Working Group is a sound one. Perhaps, San Francisco should consider an on-going working group to coordinate this research and ensure that policies developed are sound and effective. The Animal Control and Welfare Commission could fulfill the role of coordinating an on-going working group, as could ACC.

SOME PERSPECTIVE

Dogs have lived with people for more than 12,000 years. The Ohlone people shared their lives with dogs, so, in a very real sense, dogs have been in San Francisco longer than anyone descended from colonial settlers. Dogs provide aid and comfort to the young, the elderly, the disabled, and the sick. They are loved members of the family. The SF SPCA, in a “Statement to the City and County of San Francisco Advisory Dogs Off-Leash Task Force”, dated April 14, 1999, says:

“Perhaps most importantly, dogs also contribute to a more positive environment in our City by facilitating communication between people. Studies have found that the presence of a dog increases the likelihood of friendly contact. This is especially true – and important – for people

with mobility problems or other special needs that keep them socially isolated. As one dog organization has noted, '[n]eighbors who would otherwise have little reason to speak to one another will stop and chat when dogs are present.' ... This fact is an important ingredient in the formation of a community. There are countless examples of dogs introducing people to other people, thus leading to the formation of neighborhood groups, park clean-up days, new friendships, and even marriage." (p. 2).

How prevalent are serious dog bites? Nationally, there are an estimated 53 million dogs, and an estimated 4.5 million dog bites each year, of which about 20% (800,000) require medical attention. (AVMA report, p. 1733). These statistics do not mean that 10% of all dogs bite, since they don't account for repeat offenders. Of course, even one dog bite is one too many. That's why we need a concerted, comprehensive approach to deal with aggression in dogs. Any dog that bites should be evaluated to determine if there is a health reason (dogs in pain can bite) or a behavior problem that has to be addressed.

The Humane Society of the United States says, "Out of the millions of bites, about 10-20 are fatal each year. While certainly tragic, it represents a very small number statistically and should not be considered as a basis for sweeping legislative action." (Position paper on breed-specific policies, http://www.hsus.org/pets/issues_affecting_our_pets/dangerous_dogs.html). Obviously, any fatal dog attack is devastating for the families and friends of the victim. Systems already exist to deal with such incidents, through the police, the courts, and vicious and dangerous dog hearings. But we should be careful that we do not overreact to a tragic incident and rush to implement legislation before we have a chance to think about it.

Nationally, about 70% of the people killed by dogs each year are children under the age of 12. (AVMA report, p. 1741). Of course, even one death is one too many. Clearly education about dog safety for children and for parents of young children is critically important, as is training of dogs in families with young children. To put the numbers in perspective, however, note that over 1000 children die each year as a result of abuse, most at the hands of their parents or primary caregivers. (American Family Physician, March 15, 1999, published by the American Academy of Family Physicians, <http://www.aafp.org/afp/990315ap/1577.html>).

The National SAFE KIDS Campaign provides information on the causes of unintentional death and injury for children under the age of 14 on their website (<http://www.safekids.org>). Dog bites are not mentioned. The National SAFE KIDS Campaign lists the following causes of death and the annual number of fatalities associated with each (note that all cause significantly more fatalities than dog bites):

Unintentional Injury	Fatalities in 2001 (unless otherwise noted)
Motor Vehicle Crashes	1,579
Drowning	859
Pedestrian Injuries	669
Fire -and Burn-Related Injuries	532
Playground-Equipment-Related Injuries	147 (since 1990)
Bicycle-Related Crashes	134
Falls	121
Poisoning	96
Inline Skating Injuries	87 (since 1992)
Firearm-Related Injuries	72
ATV-Related Injuries	44
School-Bus-Related Injuries	26 (in 2002)

(Source: National SAFE KIDS Campaign, http://www.safekids.org/tier2_rl.cfm?folder_id=540)

Is there really a public safety crisis involving dogs in San Francisco? We have less than 60% of the national average of dog bites. The total number of dog bites reported in San Francisco in 2004 was 384, down 20% from the number in 2003 (SFPD testimony before Police Commission, and private communication). But – and this is a big “but” – San Francisco does not separate incidents where dogs bite other dogs from incidents where dogs bite people when it reports the number of dog bites. Since the vast majority of dog bites involve one dog biting another, the number of people bitten by dogs and the percentage of the national average are actually significantly lower than the official numbers would suggest.

According to ACC, about one-quarter to one-third of the households in San Francisco have at least one dog. Therefore, they estimate the total number of dogs in the City to be about 120,000 – 140,000. Considering the number of dogs in San Francisco, the number of bites is extremely small. Do the math: 120,000 dogs times 365 days in a year equals the potential for a minimum of 44 million bites each year. The actual number is 384 (and a significant number of those are dog-dog, not dog-people bites).

Reports of serious dog bites and fatal dog attacks make the news precisely because they are unusual and rare.

SUMMARY

Recent events have shocked and saddened us all. Dealing with the issue of aggressive dogs is something we as individuals, communities, and a city should address. We need a concerted, comprehensive effort to address the problem of aggressive dogs. There is no single thing we can do to prevent aggression in dogs. There is, unfortunately, no quick fix.

Spaying/neutering is critically important and controls to prevent irresponsible breeding are sorely needed. Mandatory spaying/neutering should be discussed, but requires careful consideration before implementation to ensure there are no adverse unintended consequences. We need a sustained, citywide effort to teach people, especially children, parents, and dog owners, about dog behavior so they know how to act around dogs and what the warning signs of developing aggression are. We need to ensure all dog owners understand the characteristics and needs of different breeds of dog, to ensure that the dogs people bring into their homes match their own personalities, abilities, experiences, and lifestyles. We need more education about responsible dog ownership once someone gets a dog. Dog training should be as much a part of our culture as is education for our children. Breed-specific bans, while emotionally satisfying, do not stop the problems of aggressive dogs. We need a multi-agency approach, with the SF Unified School District, Recreation and Park Department, Department of Public Health, SFPD, ACC, Department of Children, Youth and Families, and private non-profits and other interest groups all playing a part in getting the word out about dog safety and controlling aggression if it occurs.

The worst thing we could do, however, is to develop legislation, regulations, or restrictions that are ineffective, unenforceable, unfair, or wildly unpopular. We run the risk that we will be lulled into a false sense of security that we have addressed the problem, when, in fact, we have not. Besides, it's not clear exactly what happened in the house on Lincoln Avenue (at least to those of us who rely on media reports about the incident for information). It is therefore difficult to know exactly what would have prevented it, although the lack of spaying/neutering seems to have been an important issue. When we make policy at the height of emotion after a traumatic event, we run the risk of making bad policy. Many politicians in Washington, DC now regret their votes in favor of the Patriot Act, which passed overwhelmingly in the immediate wake of September 11th. They now say they did not consider all the consequences and ramifications of the policies included in the Act when they voted for it. We must be careful that we don't find ourselves in a similar situation with the issue of aggressive dogs. Members of the Working Group should put any proposed legislation through a test – How would the proposed legislation have prevented

the most recent maulings and deaths? If the proposed legislation would not have prevented the attacks, it should be reconsidered.

SFDOG stands ready and willing to help the City develop policies to deal with problems caused by dangerous and aggressive dogs.