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Calgary dog attacks fall to lowest level in 25 years

City a leader in reducing canine problems, says top bylaw officer

By Sean Myers, Calgary Herald February 21, 2009

Attacks by aggressive dogs are at the lowest level they've been in 25 years despite a steady population growth and the absence of breed-specific legislation brought in to tackle canine issues in other jurisdictions.

Despite the low numbers, Calgary's top bylaw officer plans to delve deeper into the causes of dog attacks to try to bring the incidents even lower.

"This is exactly what we've been targeting," said Bill Bruce. "Our ultimate goal, of course, is to get it to zero, or as close to that as possible."

Bruce said Calgary is a leader in reducing dog attacks in Canada, noting that he often receives invitations from animal services around the world to talk about the work done here to reduce dog bites.

Calgary bylaw officers recorded 340 reported aggressive dog incidents in 2008 which included chases, bites and damage to property.

Of those, 145 complaints were bites.

In 2007, 374 aggressive dog calls were made, including 137 bites, and in 2006, of 402 aggressive dog complaints, 199 were for bites.

By comparison, back in 1985, the city received a whopping 1,938 aggressive dog complaints, including 621 bites, at a time when Calgary had a population of just over 600,000.

A new pet owner bylaw was brought in three years ago that included stiffer fines and a recognition that aggressive behaviour in dogs is normally traced back to irresponsible owners. Bruce said both the heavier penalties -- ranging from \$350 to \$1,500, to euthanizing the dog--and the philosophy of blaming bad owners rather than pets has helped reduce incidents.

This year, Bruce is launching a pilot project where he'll have six officers dedicated to following up every aggressive dog complaint to identify common factors in attacks that can be addressed in future bylaw enforcement and public education campaigns.

"We want to look at everything that led up to an aggressive dog attack," said Bruce. "We're hoping to find four to six common things that people do that causes dogs to bite. Our goal is not to have anyone bitten by a dog."

At the same time Bruce investigates softer approaches to addressing pet owner issues, he's also been given a bigger stick with which to penalize chronically non-compliant dog owners.

In the fall, bylaw enforcement gained the right to tag a dog as a nuisance pet, which means doubling the fines on the owner.

One dog has already received this designation, according to Bruce.

Brandy Campbell-Biggs, president of Pit Bulls For Life, a non-profit animal rescue operation geared specifically toward pit bulls, said targeting bad owners instead of stigmatizing entire breeds is the key to reducing aggressive incidents.

While dog bites have been going down, the number of pit bulls coming to the city has been increasing, she said.

She doesn't know how many there are in the city, but her organization has placed 160 pit bulls in foster homes or with permanent adoptive owners in Calgary over the past three and a half years.

Pit Bulls For Life brings the dogs in from jurisdictions with breed-specific legislation that sees many breeds deemed dangers, including pit bulls, targeted for euthanasia. She said 20 per cent of the dogs they help come from Ontario.

"We have a lot more pit bulls in Calgary now," said Campbell-Briggs. "Part of the reason is we don't have breed-specific legislation. I'm proud to be a Calgarian because our animal by-law officers deal with specific incidents and don't deal with it as a breed issue. There's no bias and that's so important."

Pit Bulls For Life doesn't take in any dogs with histories of aggression toward humans or other animals and says it works with the city bylaw department to educate owners.

Canada Post has also noticed a slight reduction in dog incidents involving its letter carriers in Calgary that bucks the trend nationally.

From January to August last year, 25 dog incidents were reported by carriers, two of which resulted in time off work. In the same time period in 2007, 28 incidents were reported, with three requiring time away from work.

An aggressive dog can lead to an entire block losing mail service until the animal is brought under control.

"We have to ensure the safety of our employees--your front step and front yard are our employees' workplace," said Andrean Wolvers, Canada Post safety manager for Calgary. "We tell our employees when in doubt, get out."

Wolvers says partnerships with the city and other organizations that send employees into residential neighbourhoods has helped reduce dog attacks on posties.

"The city and Bill Bruce have been very proactive," said Wolvers.

The Calgary Humane Society said the working relationship it has with the city is unique in Canada.

"We have a very collaborative relation-ship. When we talk to other humane societies, they say we're the only ones they've heard of that have a positive working relationship with the city bylaw department," said Calgary Humane Society spokeswoman Lindsay Jones.

"Other cities learn from us and the way we do things here."

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