

WCRAS/NHS Policy and Protocol: Identifying and Handling Dogs Exhibiting Dangerous Behavior

Description and Policy Statement

Definition and policy statement

Aggression is complex behavior defined as *patterns of behavior that serve to threaten or harm others*. Displays of aggression that serve to harm others involve biting, while threat behaviors involve freezing, staring, snarling, growling and air snapping. All displays of aggression are cause for concern in regard to human safety and human safety must always be a primary consideration. It is essential to identify dogs with aggressive tendencies to prevent injuries whenever possible. This shelter recognizes that dogs that exhibit dangerous levels of aggressive behavior to humans or other animals must not be made available for adoption or rescue but must be humanely euthanized.

What causes canine aggression?

Aggression is the result of both genetic and environmental influences. Dogs are biologically and anatomically prepared for aggressive behavior because it is adaptive behavior. In other words, aggressive behavior serves to reduce or resolve conflict with a human or other animal. Aggression is motivated by the strong emotions of fear and anger therefore aggression can be either offensive (anger) or defensive (fear) in nature. The adaptive value of aggression does not mean, however that aggression is not problematic or even maladaptive in some individuals.

Although all dogs have the potential to exhibit aggression, the propensity to do so varies greatly among individuals. In fact, individuals possess different thresholds for aggression. The term aggression threshold refers to the point at which an individual resorts to using aggressive behavior to resolve a conflict. A dog with a low threshold will trigger to aggression more quickly than one that has a higher threshold for aggression. An individual dog's genetic makeup, level of socialization and what he/she has learned in his/her life will determine how often and to what degree he/she exhibits aggression. For example, some dogs are very quick to bite if they become fearful, while others will not bite even when they experience extreme fearfulness. Additionally, certain breeds of dogs are more predisposed to possess lower aggression thresholds because of the traits and

functions their breed has been bred to possess over generations. These breeds include those bred to guard (such as Rottweilers) and those bred to fight (such as pit bull terriers).

Safety and liability concerns

Aggressive behavior in dogs constitutes a threat to public safety. Most people are bitten by dogs they own or that are known to them. Children are the most common victims of dog bites and when a young child is bitten it is usually directed towards the face. Aggression jeopardizes the dog-owner relationship as the human-animal bond is compromised following an aggressive act. Many dogs are relinquished to animal shelters because of their aggressive behavior.

In addition to human safety, liability is another great concern when addressing aggressive behavior in companion dogs. In the U.S., owners can be held civilly liable and even criminally culpable for any damage caused by their dog. Liability is an issue that should be taken very seriously by any shelter or rescue organization that re-homes dogs to the public. Liability does not necessarily end when ownership is transferred to another individual or agency. Furthermore, even if there is a complete understanding of the problem and all necessary precautions are stringently adhered to, there is no guarantee that there will not be a harmful incident which the organization could be held liable for. It is the responsibility of every humane organization that places relinquished dogs into new homes to ensure that they are placing only safe dogs back into the community. This practice will not only protect the public but will enhance the reputation of the organization.

Welfare issues of housing dogs exhibiting dangerous behavior.

Housing dogs exhibiting dangerous behavior should not be considered, as this constitutes a threat to the safety of the shelter staff, a considerable cost, and jeopardizes the welfare of the individual dog. Attempts to “rehabilitate” dogs exhibiting dangerous behavior in a shelter environment is not only an unsafe practice, but also practically impossible to accomplish. Modifying the behavior of a dangerous dog requires a well thought out and executed behavior modification program that is implemented consistently for weeks, months, or sometimes years. Most shelters do not have the resources to attempt such treatment, and the shelter environment is not conducive to treatment success. Although aggression can sometimes be modified to a certain degree, depending on many factors, it can never be “cured”, and the prognosis is guarded in most cases. Often, some level of

management of the behavior is all that can be realistically achieved even under ideal circumstances.

All dogs deemed adoptable should be closely monitored for signs of behavioral deterioration during their shelter stay. Shelters are not normal or natural environments for housing dogs. Meeting their emotional and behavioral needs is extremely challenging in the shelter setting. Thus, long-term confinement in an animal shelter compromises behavioral health. Many factors can contribute to the behavioral deterioration of a dog including frustration from lack of control over the environment, high noise levels (barking), prolonged arousal, inadequate exercise, inadequate social contact, and inadequate mental stimulation. Behavioral stress from the frustration and anxiety evoked from confinement and inadequate positive social stimulation can lead to an increased level of inappropriate behaviors, including aggression, that dogs may learn and practice over time in response to the shelter environment. Prolonged stress impacts the welfare and quality of life of the animal. Dogs that exhibit signs of anxiety, frustration or aggression during their stay should be reevaluated by the behavior department. This shelter believes in practicing prevention of behavioral deterioration through stress reduction and environmental enrichment practices however, it recognizes that these measures may not always ensure the wellbeing of animals in its care and regular welfare and safety assessments are required.

Euthanasia may be necessary for individual animals that are suffering from emotional trauma or that pose a risk to public health or safety. When a decision is made to euthanize an animal, it is imperative that the procedure be performed without delay. Dogs exhibiting dangerous behavior should not be held beyond their legal holding periods, but instead humanely euthanized as soon as possible to prevent undue stress and anxiety on the dog and risk for the shelter staff and volunteers. No matter what the underlying circumstances are surrounding the euthanasia of an animal, these decisions are always difficult. Delays in action, however, prolongs the stress of individual animals as well as the shelter staff.

Recognition/Diagnosis (*not relevant to WCRAS) (not relevant to NHS)**

Behavioral History – Surrender Profiles:

In all cases of owner surrenders, shelter staff will obtain a complete behavioral history from the previous owner using the surrender profile questionnaire, which includes questions meant to elucidate aggressive behavior.

Medical Exam:

Every dog should be examined by the veterinary staff upon intake to the shelter. Any displays of aggressive behavior during the exam will be noted on the veterinary assessment form.

Stray Hold:**

Shelter staff shall complete a concerning behavior report any time a dog displays aggressive behavior during this period.

Behavior Evaluation:**

Each dog that is potentially eligible for transfer should be evaluated by a skilled handler who is proficient at safely performing and interpreting the dog's responses to the behavior evaluation. The results of the evaluation will be recorded on the behavior evaluation form.

Adoption Floor:*

Shelter staff or volunteers caring for the dogs placed on the adoption floor will complete a concerning behavior report for any displays of aggressive behavior and present the report to the shelter manager or behavior staff.

Foster Care:*

Foster parents shall immediately report any displays of aggressive behavior to the shelter manager or behavior staff.

Returns due to aggression in the adoptive home:*

A surrender profile will be filled out upon the dog's return to elucidate the nature of the aggressive behavior exhibited in the home.

Euthanasia Criteria

Aggressive behavior involves a broken skin bite (level 3-6), an inhibited bite (level 1 - air snap or level 2 non-broken skin bite), or threat behaviors (snarling or growling), excluding puppy nipping or accidental tooth contact during play or while taking a treat, or aggression elicited by extreme pain (i.e., after being hit by a car). Dangerous levels of aggressive behavior involve a broken skin bite at a level 4 or above or multiple level 3 bites. For those dogs that do not reach that criteria but who exhibit higher levels of aggressive behavior in certain situations, a risk assessment must be completed to determine if euthanasia is the safest outcome for the dog.

The below list indicates that euthanasia is the safest and most ethical decision.

- Any dog with a history of exhibiting dangerous level of aggressive behavior toward people, including children, in the previous home.
 - Any dog with a history of exhibiting aggressive behavior towards people, including children, involving a Level 3 bite must have a risk assessment completed*.
- Any dog that exhibits dangerous levels of aggressive behavior to humans or animals while in custody, including foster homes.
 - Any dog with a history of exhibiting aggressive behavior towards staff, volunteers, or the public, involving a Level 3 bite while in custody must have a risk assessment completed*.
- Any dog that is returned to the shelter for exhibiting dangerous level of aggressive behavior in the adoptive home.
- Any dog with a history of dangerous level of aggression behavior to other dogs.
- Any dog with a single incident of killing another dog.
- Any dog with a single incident of killing a companion cat that the dog has lived with.
 - Any dog with a history of more than one incident of killing chickens, outdoor cats (owned, feral, or semi-feral), and/or wild small mammals (rabbits, squirrels, etc.) must have a risk assessment completed*.
- Any dog with a single incident of killing large livestock or companion farm animals (horses, goats, pot-belly pigs, etc.).
- Any dog that has been declared a dangerous or vicious dog.

**Risk assessment for each organization may result in a different outcome decision.*