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Rushing to ban pit bulls is the wrong response

By **Brenda F. Barnette**
Special to the Times

The recent pit bull attack in SeaTac, in which a 71-year-old woman, *Huong Le*, was attacked by two dogs, is a tragic reminder that no dog — regardless of breed — should be allowed to run loose. Blaming pit bulls and rushing to ban the breed isn't the right response.

County officials say they are spread too thin to respond to citizens' complaints of dogs running loose, according to newspaper reports. By not enforcing existing leash laws, the community failed to protect *Huong Le* and the dogs who were shot to death. Putting another law on the books that is not likely to be enforced, such as a pit-bull ban, is not the answer.

Until we start focusing on the underlying causes of bites — instead of focusing on specific breeds of dogs — we'll never decrease the number of dog attacks. Enacting a breed ban will make it more difficult for shelters to place loving pit bulls with responsible owners, increasing the number of dogs killed in shelters, without making anyone safer.

It's an owner's responsibility to make sure a dog is well-trained. No dog should be running loose under any circumstances. We have leash laws on the books and we should enforce them. We need to hold owners responsible for any behavior that is not appropriate.

We can't legislate against the intentions of those who want to own vicious dogs. But we can be tougher about requiring responsible ownership. Dangerous dogs are often animals in need of food and medical attention. They are dogs that haven't been socialized and are often left chained in the yard. We can identify those problems before a bite occurs — and take action, requiring humane confinement and discouraging the chaining of dogs.

Animal cruelty is a serious crime, and we need to penalize those who abuse dogs. When it comes to dog fighting, not only should we prosecute the owners involved, we should prevent them from owning more dogs.

Dog bites are largely preventable. *Karen Delise*, founder and director of research for the National Canine Research Council, which collects data on dog-bite incidents, says dog bites can be traced to one or more of the following conditions: a very young child left alone with a dog; a guard dog encouraged to be aggressive by the owner; a free-roaming dog, or pack of dogs; isolated and unsocialized dogs; and previously aggressive



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behavior that was ignored and not corrected by the owner.

Research also shows that unaltered dogs are more likely to bite than those that are spayed or neutered. At the Seattle Humane Society, we are committed to spaying and neutering. All of our dogs are spayed and neutered before they're available for adoption. Last year, we worked with Seattle Purebred Dog Rescue to offer free spaying and neutering for 215 pit bulls. Projects like this can be replicated, reducing unwanted births and behavior problems.

We can also do more to educate people, especially children, about safe interaction with dogs. Never approach or attempt to pet unfamiliar dogs. Always ask for the owner's permission before approaching a leashed dog. If you encounter an unfamiliar dog, remain calm and silent, with your arms at your sides.

Children should never be left alone with dogs — of any breed. They should be taught to be respectful and careful — no teasing or hitting.

Please remember that most pit bulls don't bite anyone. In fact, some qualities pit bulls are known for — being steadfast and fearless — are exactly the characteristics that make them excellent family dogs and therapy dogs. They can be more gentle, particularly with kids, than other, smaller breeds. Ask any of the 150 kids, ages 5 through 12, who attended day camp at the Seattle Humane Society this summer and fell in love with Scrappy, a pit bull certified as a Canine Good Citizen, and the camp's mascot.

The fact that pit bulls account for a disproportionate number of reported dog bites in Seattle, according to the Seattle Animal Shelter, doesn't prove pit bulls are more dangerous than other breeds. It does suggest pit bulls are popular. We know they account for approximately 30 percent of lost, stray and abandoned animals in our community's shelters.

Our goal is a humane and civil society, where people and pets are safe. That depends on good laws and good law enforcement. But it also requires recognizing how we've failed — and who we've failed.

In the SeaTac case, we failed the victim by allegedly not responding to several neighbors' concerns about the dogs running loose. But we also failed the dogs, by not protecting them from an owner who failed to keep them under his control. We can do better.

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