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opinion

A dog breed ban doesn't increase public safety

By Marie Belew Wheatley

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The American Humane Association, headquartered here in Denver, strongly opposes the current dog-breed bans in Denver and Aurora.

American Humane believes no breed automatically poses a high risk of attack, and that it is unjust to punish loving, responsible dog owners merely because of a breed's reputation.

We also support efforts to protect citizens from dangerous animals and encourage communities to hold pet owners responsible for any injury caused by animals in their care.

We encourage dog owners to undergo basic obedience training with their pets and to socialize them with people and other animals from an early age.

By definition, dangerous dogs are those that, without provocation, have attacked or behaved in

a terrorizing manner. In order to protect the public from these types of animals, communities may legitimately enact "dangerous dog" laws.

Such laws however, should be enforced using a fair and equitable process based on the actions of the individual animal and owner, and not upon the unreliable and often nebulous criteria of judging a dog "dangerous" based on its breed or assumed breed.

A study in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association found that breed bans are ineffective because breeds responsible for human dog-bite related fatalities have varied over time. The study noted that since 1975 more than 30 different breeds have been responsible for fatal attacks on people.

Breed-specific legislation that outlaws specific dog breeds can increase the danger to the community by spawning black market interest, indiscriminate and irresponsible breeding practices, and subsequent overpopulation issues.

In addition, breed-specific legislation has not proven to be an effective measure of reducing dog bites or increasing public safety.

Colorado's Coalition for Living Safely with Dogs recently produced data from its yearlong survey on dog bites in this state. It found that most dogs don't bite.

The survey found that 2,060 bites that were recorded in the 17-county survey area, which included a total population of about 700,000

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dogs. In other words - only 1 out of 350 dogs actually bit someone.

NOTE: This is an online only column and has not been edited.

Of the dogs that were responsible for bites, fully 129 different breeds were involved, including much-loved breeds that are rarely considered "dangerous dogs" by the general public and are never included in breed-specific bans.

Breed-specific legislation is costly to implement and enforce, with the money spent without any evidence that breed-specific legislation actually has any real effect on public safety.

In light of the current economic situation, breed-specific ordinances in Denver and Aurora would seem to be measures providing a false sense of security with precious tax dollars.

I strongly urge your readers to think about the facts surrounding breed legislation and to appeal to their public officials to repeal ordinances that clearly do not serve the public interest.

Breed-specific laws play to public fears without ever providing real answers to the problem of dangerous dogs.

Two primary things are needed: 1) Good public education efforts to promote responsible dog ownership; 2) Strong non-breed-specific dangerous dog ordinances that address the true root of dangerous dog problems - irresponsible owners.

Marie Belew Wheatley is president and CEO of the American Humane Association. EDITOR'S

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