

Policy and Protocol: Identifying and Handling Aggressive Dogs

1. Description and Policy Statement

Definition and policy statement

Aggression is a complex behavior: it represents intent (via either an overt attack or an agonistic threat) by an individual animal to injure another animal or a person. Canine attack behaviors include lunging, snapping, and biting, while threats include warnings that the dog may attack (freezing, stiffening, staring, snarling, or growling). Both are cause for concern for human safety and human safety must always be a primary consideration when addressing canine aggression. It is essential to identify dogs with aggressive tendencies in order to prevent injuries whenever possible. This shelter recognizes that aggressive dogs must not be made available for adoption, but must be humanely euthanized. Therefore, it is our policy that dogs that have a documented history of aggressive behavior towards a person or other animal, or that at or subsequent to impoundment have manifested some sign of a behavioral or temperamental defect that could pose a safety risk will not be offered for adoption, but will be humanely euthanized.

What causes canine aggression?

Aggression is the result of both genetic and environmental influences. Dogs (like all animals) are biologically and anatomically prepared for aggressive behavior because it is adaptive. In other words, aggression is used when a dog perceives conflict or contest and may be used for defense as well as offense. The adaptive value of aggression does not mean, however that aggression is not problematic or even maladaptive in some individuals. Aggression is often motivated by fear, anxiety stress, or pain and can be an indicator of emotional (behavioral) or physical disorders that represent both a human safety issue as well as an animal welfare issue. In addition, some dogs may exhibit true dominance aggression, which also represents a substantial human safety issue.

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 threshold refers to the point at which the individual resorts to using aggressive behavior to resolve a conflict. A dog with a low threshold will use aggression more quickly than one that has a higher threshold for aggression in a given situation. An individual dog’s genetic makeup as well as what he/she learns from the environment will determine how often and to what degree he 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 what traits and functions their breed has been developed and bred to possess and perform 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. Approximately 5 million dog bites are reported in the U.S. every year. Most people are bitten by dogs they own or that are known to them. Children are the most common victim and when a 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, rescue organization, or individual that is considered the “owner” or “caretaker” of an aggressive animal. Liability does not necessarily end when ownership is transferred to another individual or agency by any method, be it sale, gift or adoption. Furthermore, even if there is a complete understanding of the problem and all necessary precautions are stringently adhered to at all times, this is no guarantee that there will not be a harmful incident which the entire organization, including the board of directors, could be held liable for. It is the responsibility of every humane organization that places relinquished dogs into new homes to insure 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 for shelter staff and for aggressive dogs housed in shelters

Housing aggressive dogs 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” aggressive dogs in a shelter environment are not only an unsafe practice, but practically impossible to accomplish. Modifying the behavior of an aggressive 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 stays. 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, constant 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 increase 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 who 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 stress through environmental enrichment and training, however it recognizes that these measures may not always ensure the wellbeing of animals in its care and regular welfare and safety assessments and audits are required.

Euthanasia may be necessary for individual animals that are suffering from behavioral disease 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. In many instances, this will serve to protect individual animal welfare and public safety as well as serving the population as a whole. For example, aggressive dogs 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 public. No matter what the underlying circumstances are surrounding the euthanasia of an animal, these procedures are always difficult. Delays in action, however often add to population health issues as well as prolonging the stress of individual animals in the shelter.

2. Recognition/Diagnosis

Behavioral History – Surrender Profiles:

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

Acclimation Period (3-5 days):

Shelter staff shall note and discuss with behavior staff any displays of aggression during this period.

Medical Exam:

Every dog is examined by the veterinary staff. Any displays of aggression during the exam will be noted on the Medical Assessment Form and discussed with the behavior staff.

Behavior Assessment:

Each dog that is potentially eligible for adoption will be evaluated by a skilled professional proficient in their ability to safely perform and interpret the behavior assessment. The results of the assessment will be recorded on the Canine Behavior Assessment Form.

Adoption Floor:

Shelter staff or volunteers working with the dogs placed on the adoption floor will note and discuss with the behavior staff any displays of aggression.

Foster:

Foster parents shall immediately report any displays of aggression to the behavior staff.

Returns due to aggression in the adoptive home:

A surrender profile will be completed upon the dog’s return to elucidate aggressive behaviors.

3. Euthanasia Criteria

- History of aggression in the previous home (not to include 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).
- History of any aggression to children

- History of any bite that broke the skin of a human
- History of generalized injurious dog aggression (including dogs trained to fight)
- History of killing another dog
- History of killing multiple cats
- History of extreme prey drive – killing multiple small mammals

- Any dog older than 4-5 months of age that is extremely under-socialized* and fearful and fails to acclimate after 3-5 days.

- Any dog that exhibits aggression to staff during its acclimation period

- Any dog that exhibits aggression during the behavior assessment

- Any dog that bites the veterinary staff during the medical exam; that the medical staff are unable to examine due to its behavior; or that is deemed unsafe to attempt examination.

- Any dog that exhibits aggression during its stay

- Any dog that exhibits aggression in a foster home

- Any dog that is returned to the shelter for exhibiting aggression

- Any dog that exhibits extreme prey drive

*Under-socialization results from a lack of appropriate exposure to people and normal events during the critical period of canine development for socialization (3-12 weeks of age) and manifests as extreme fearfulness and inability to cope with environmental change. Severely under-socialized dogs often remain fearful for life suffering from generalized anxiety and rarely are suitable as pets.

4. Notification

The Executive Director will be notified immediately via a behavior euthanasia request form of a diagnosis of aggression.

5. Disposition

Euthanasia of an aggressive dog should be performed as soon as possible (within 24 hours) after obtaining the signature of the executive director. Neglecting to do so poses a safety risk to the staff and is considered inhumane to the dog.

6. Housing

In cases where immediate euthanasia of an aggressive dog is not possible, the dog shall be housed with a cage card indicating that the dog is aggressive displayed on the cage front. In these cases, only trained staff will handle these dogs and only as required for care. In the case of “bite holds”, only staff who have been vaccinated against rabies virus will handle these dogs.

7. Treatment

Dogs that have demonstrated aggressive behavior either in their previous home or while housed in the shelter will not be treated due to safety and liability concerns and the poor prognosis of such an attempt. These dogs will be humanely euthanized immediately as it is not the policy of the shelter to “give the dog another chance” once the propensity for aggression has been revealed.

8. Documentation

Aggressive behavior will be recorded by the shelter staff

- on the animals surrender profile
- on the animal medical record
- on the behavior assessment form
- on an incident report to be filled out by any staff or volunteer interacting with the dog

Euthanasia of an aggressive dog should be recorded in the appropriate euthanasia log.