

## HANDLING POTENTIALLY AGGRESSIVE CANINES



### PURPOSE:

The purpose of this procedure is to inform employees about the hazards associated in dealing with potentially aggressive dogs, and to outline methods to protect them.

### LOCATIONS:

Animal shelters, parks and residences

### BACKGROUND:

The term “aggression”, when discussing canines, refers to a wide variety of behaviors that occur for a multitude of reasons in various circumstances. Virtually all wild animals are aggressive when guarding their territories, defending their offspring and protecting themselves. Species that live in groups, including people and dogs, also use aggression and the threat of aggression to keep the peace and to negotiate social interactions.

To say that a dog is “aggressive” can mean a whole host of things. Aggression encompasses a range of behaviors that usually begins with warnings and can culminate in an attack. Dogs may abort their efforts at any point during an aggressive encounter. A dog that shows aggression to people usually exhibits some part of the following sequence of increasingly intense behaviors:

- Becoming very still and rigid
- Guttural bark that sounds threatening
- Lunging forward or charging at the person with no contact
- Mouthing, as though to move or control the person, without applying significant pressure
- “Muzzle punch” (the dog literally punches the person with her nose)
- Growl
- Showing teeth
- Snarl (a combination of growling and showing teeth)
- Snap (the dog does not make contact but bites quickly in the direction of a person)

- Quick nip that leaves no mark but makes contact
- Quick bite that tears the skin
- Bite with enough pressure to cause a bruise
- Bite that causes puncture wounds
- Repeated bites in rapid succession
- Bite and shake



Dogs do not always follow this sequence, and they often do several of the behaviors above simultaneously. Many times, people don't recognize the warning signs before a bite, so they perceive dogs as suddenly flying off the handle in an unpredictable manner. However, that's rarely the case. It can be just milliseconds between a warning and a bite, but dogs rarely bite without giving some type of warning beforehand.

## HAZARDS:

Working with dogs carries a risk. Employees of shelters have to deal with potentially dangerous dogs and situations. In fact, anyone who works with dogs is at risk, although it should be remembered that most dogs choose not to bite us. All dogs are capable of biting and some have already done so (before being brought into care), making routine procedures such as approaching, catching and handling dogs, potentially dangerous activities for those concerned.

### Dog Size

Regardless of other factors, large dogs are more frightening and can inflict more damage than small dogs. However small dogs are often not given the respect they deserve (the same as you would a large breed dog) and this can lead to a higher ratio of unreported dog aggression from small dogs.

### Dog Age

Young dogs with an aggression problem are believed to be more malleable and easier to rehabilitate than older dogs. Aggression can be caused by medical conditions such as senior dogs that have hypothyroidism or an animal exhibiting pain from chronic or acute illness/injury.

### Bite History

Dogs that have already bitten are a known risk and an insurance liability as they are more likely to use this behavior again.

### **Severity**

Dogs that stop their aggression at showing teeth, growling or snapping are significantly safer to live and work with than dogs that bite. Likewise, dogs who have delivered minor bruises, scratches and small punctures are less risky than dogs that have inflicted serious wounds.

### **Predictability**

Dogs at the highest risk of being euthanized for aggression are those who give little or no warning before they bite and who are inconsistently, unpredictably aggressive. Dogs who give warning before they bite allow people and other animal's time to retreat and avoid getting hurt.

### **Triggers/Targets**

Understanding dog behavior is essential for anyone that works with dogs. Dog behavior has genetic components – the ancestry of the breed and the breed temperament as well as the lineage of the specific dog. In addition, environmental components also imprint and result in specific dog behavior – the dog's lifestyle and learning. The way a dog behaves depends on the circumstances at any particular point in time. Generally when dogs feel threatened or frightened in any way there is a chance they may attack when approached. In a shelter environment stress can make a dog more likely to be aggressive due to the fight or flight response. In a kennel the dog is unable to get away (flight) so aggression can be interpreted by the dog as the most available protective tool (fight).

Aggression in dogs has many causes, including predatory (to obtain food), maternal (to protect young), hierarchical or household (to gain status), territorial (to protect shelter, food, toys) and inter-dog (competition between rivals). Many dog bites are fear-based, where the dog does not necessarily want to bite but feels threatened or frightened in some way. It is helpful to understand why a dog is displaying aggressive behaviors but the potential end result of all types of aggression is the same – a bite. An understanding and ability to recognize canine body language is essential. Identifying body language takes practice and opportunity to do these in controlled and supervised circumstances is preferred. Some breeds and some individuals are easier to read than others

How often a dog is exposed to targets of their aggression can affect how easy it is to manage and resolve their behavior. Triggers should be removed from a dog in shelter's environment in order to reduce the threat to staff, volunteers and visitors. For example:

**Kennel Aggression** – where a dog is aggressive when in a kennel. The dog obviously has to be in a kennel as it is in the shelter but providing the dog with positive reinforcement by way of treats when the dog is behaving positively at the kennel and/or using kennel blockers (sheets over the kennel to block the view of people/dogs walking by) should be implemented.

**Aggression to strangers** – dogs that react to strangers in or out of the kennel should be handled by staff only and new staff introductions should be made by staff that the dog already feels comfortable with. Strangers providing non-threatening behavior to a dog and providing treats for calm and relaxed behavior can aid in reducing the fear of strangers over time.

**Aggression to dogs** - when handling a dog that has a known aggressive reaction to another dog safety can be increased by reducing the interaction or visibility of the trigger dog. This includes housing the dogs that don't get along at opposite ends of the facility. Housing a dog that is reactive to other dogs in the kennel closest to the exit so that it does not have to be walked past other dogs when going out can increase staff safety. Ensuring volunteers are aware that the dog they are walking is reactive and potentially aggressive to other dogs is vital.

**Aggression in the field** – when an Animal Control Officer is presented with an aggressive dog they are unable to just remove themselves from the situation as one may in a less acute scenario as they are responsible for ensuring public safety. However, tools such as dog treats, catch-pole, snap and snare leash, bite stick and the use of a buddy system with another Animal Control Officer or Police are available to them to assist. It is most important to secure an animal in a controlled environment (shed, yard, animal control vehicle, etc) to reduce the risk to the public or other animals. It is always advisable to assess a situation ahead of time to determine the range of potential scenarios and each scenario's exit strategy.

## PRECAUTIONS:

### Handling dogs & minimizing risk

Based on this understanding of dog behavior and body language, there are ways to approach dogs that will lessen the chances of being attacked. Minimizing movements, avoiding eye contact and avoiding contact with the dog's face (teeth), are strategies that work for the majority of handlers. Particularly dangerous situations apply where dog handlers have to intervene in a potentially dangerous situation. A dog fight or a situation where a dog is protecting or guarding territory, belongings or another person are relatively common scenarios and carry a high level of risk.

There is also a danger where, due to lack of canine socialization or previous negative encounters, dogs are wary of the person attempting to approach them. This may be because of their uniform, due to the person's gender or simply because the person approaching made eye contact with the dog. Unless the dog is known to the person approaching, it is usually impossible to predict the dog's reaction and we must err on the side of caution. Dogs may also demonstrate behavior that differs from the canine norm. This may be due to genetic factors or because the dogs have had specific training to behave this way e.g. guard dogs, dog trained to fight, etc.

A buddy system should be implemented by staff working at the animal shelter and where possible by animal control officers working in the field, when a situation arises that one employee is unsure or not feeling safe when handling a dog. If both shelter staff is unable to handle the dog the staff should contact the supervisor for guidance. Animal control officers working in the field should contact the supervisor for guidance, or the Delta Police for assistance in extreme situations.

**PROCEDURES:****Before Giant Safety Handling and Capture Tools**

1. **Dog treats;** an effective diplomacy tool for gaining the trust of a dog; dog associate treats with positive human interaction and often will help relax the most fearful of dogs.
2. **Knowledge of subject dog's history;** using all data previously collected by DCAS (prior calls to the residence, prior interactions with subject dog) will provide direction in how to proceed. Accessing the Tempest Dog Licence database, gaining the name of the dog, may provide a better ability to control the animal (dog will respond better to commands given by use of its name).
3. **Double-sided kennels;** used in shelter, allow staff to avoid un-needed contact with a dog under stress; during cleaning phases the animal is moved to the opposite side of the kennel, away from the animal-care staff member.
4. **Catch Poles, Snappy Snares;** both tools used to capture nervous dogs, when the pet is timid about approaching a person. Catch poles allow for distance capture and a more rigid control mechanism, while the Snappy snare employs elements of surprise. Typically used in a dog capture circumstance where the dog is not wanting close human interaction. Technique to be considered when using a Catch pole is to slide the catch pole along the ground towards the animal, as this will appear less threatening. Once the catch pole has crossed the animal's personal space, gently stroke the animal with the end of the staff and then slowly apply the loop. **Never use the catch pole to lift any animal!** Support the body with your free arm and use the catch pole to control the head.
5. **Dangerous Dog Specialized Double Door;** This is a control tool engineered directly in the Animal Control Van architecture; the ACO van employs inner door gates, with an access port, allowing the ACO to secure the aggressive/fearful dog while the gates are secure, minimizing uncontrolled contact with the staff member.
6. **Leash;** a capture tool used more appropriately in circumstances where the staff member is comfortable and secure in the opinion that the subject dog is non-threatening, and unlikely to bite. Useful in gaining the trust of a dog, in that, like treats, associates positive feelings from the dog (i.e. the dog is comfortable going for walks with its prior owner).
7. **Double Leash Loop System;** used when handling a dog around the neck or face can threaten the wellbeing of the handler. The double leash system is using a clip on leash attached to the loop of a loop leash. The noose type loop is placed over the animals head and pulled tight. When the noose is required to be loosened to free the dog the clip leash can be pulled to open the loop and free the dog. This is used mostly when handling fearful dogs in the shelter.

8. **Bite Stick;** a defense tool used to protect staff from direct contact from an aggressive dog; typically used in the field in defense of an attacking dog. A bite stick gives the attacking animal something to bite besides the officer. A bite stick is most effectively used as a distraction to fill the dog's mouth, preventing the animal from biting. It can also be used to create space between yourself and the animal.
9. **Traps;** are generally used for capture of wildlife and cats. However, large dog traps are available if required by borrowing from another municipality for a feral dog. The trap is baited at the far end of the trap so the animal has to go into it to reach the food. A door is opened and connected to a treadle or a metal plate on the floor of the trap. The animal triggers or releases the door when it enters the cage and steps on the treadle or tries to remove the bait. The door then closes and locks. Cages should always be covered when moved and when in use the animal should be sheltered from weather conditions.
10. **Muzzles;** used to prevent a domestic animal from biting you by placing a device on the animal's mouth/snout/nose to prevent full opening of the mouth that can result in a bite. Muzzles can sometimes make an animal behave better. A range of muzzle types and sizes are available at the shelter for staff to use if they have to complete a treatment or examination of a dog or cat. Caution should be used when placing a muzzle. Two people should always be present and you approach for placement should always be from behind the animal.
11. **Clothing or Gloves;** Clothing and gloves used to protect bare skin are available to staff as needed. However, these protective tools should only be worn if they do not hinder the movement of the person wearing them. Thick gloves (appropriate for the thickness of eagle talons) are available in shelter and all staff has been provided with jackets and fleece to help cover bare skin.
12. **Unpredictable aggression;** A range of scenarios and situations could arise when staff is handling dogs. Most dogs in the shelter can be assessed through the kennel for their unpredictability (by body language) making incidents less likely as staff are aware not to handle or enter a kennel with a dog providing unpredictable or unsafe body language. However, it is possible for staff to make a misjudgment and be placed in a dangerous or compromising situation. All staff are to wear radios so they can make contact with another employee when necessary. All staff working alone carry a cellular phone to be able to contact with 911. However, if in the situation of an attack it is important for staff to recognize tools available to them in the shelter facility that they can use to protect themselves. These tools can range from a fire extinguisher, bite stick, hose, shovel, towels, blankets, plastic kennels, vari-kennels, etc.

**WORKPLACE TRAINING**

A safe work culture includes management concern, employee care and cooperation, and consultation and communication between employer and employee. Potential areas of concern within the working environment need to be addressed and open communication between both employee and employer is important.

Every person in the department has a varying level of experience and expertise. Some employees may have sense of trepidation, and sometimes even fear at approaching unknown dogs. There can also be a sense of embarrassment due to the public's expectation that anyone who works with dogs should know how to handle them. Alternatively, some handlers feel overly confident and sometimes this can result in attack when approaching an overly aggressive or fearful dog. It is important for the employer to recognize which employee requires what training to ensure they are comfortable with assessing the behavior of dogs in a safe manner in the shelter environment.

More intensive training options are available through group or individual class with a certified trainer and can be arranged by the manager for staff that requires a more foundation in animal behavior. In addition, there are video's and on-line lectures from known dog behavioral specialist that are available for a more in depth look at specific areas of handling and increasing safety.

Facility safety training is provided to employees when they start working at the shelter to help them determine safety tools available should they be in a situation of unpredictable aggression. Additionally, an internal debriefing of each incident where staff safety was compromised will be conducted, and recommendations will be made to make improvements if necessary and further training will be established for each employee as required.

