

Pit bulls pay for publicity

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When Linda Bober walks a tail-wagging rescued pit bull, people sometimes cross the street.

The humane investigator -- who runs Cause 4 Paws, a small shelter, out of her Calumet City home -- said it can be hard to adopt pit bulls into good homes, but "every thug wants to have one."

Though they are often the victims of abuse, the breed is being punished by hype and headlines, said trainer Curtis Scott of Chicago.

Scott has seven pit bulls of his own and has helped rehabilitate dogs from dog-fighting raids. Old wives' tales, bad owners and negative press are "causing the downfall of this breed," he said.

"The majority of them are nice dogs and deserve a chance to have a good life," he said.

Incidents might be on the rise, but the breed is booming in popularity in the region. Estimates put the Chicago pit bull population at 60,000, he said. Given their popularity among criminals and poor living conditions, Scott said he's surprised there aren't more bites.

So far this year, Calumet City Police investigator Marco Glumac said the city has had 71 dog calls involving pit bulls out of 271 dog calls, and 10 out of 18 dog bites have been by pit bulls. Most calls were about strays or dogs running loose, he said, but problems have increased in recent years as the breed has become more popular. Often the dogs are in the hands of

criminals, he said.

"We've encountered them on several drug raids in the last couple years," he said. "I can remember three pit bulls that were killed in the course of executing a search warrant, one of which had a gang tattoo branded into the side of its face."

Even after dogs are rescued, many still wait for loving homes. Scott owns two dogs taken from a Gary firefighter in a 2006 raid. Some dogs from that raid were adopted, but five or six are still at the Lake County Animal Shelter waiting for homes.

"They are very adoptable dogs, but there are not enough owners or people willing to give the dog a first chance," he said.

Some municipalities have considered banning pit bulls. Burnham officials are considering a ban after an 11-year-old girl had to climb onto the roof of a car to avoid two pit bulls who were chasing her and after complaints about loose and roaming pit bulls.

But breed bans just makes it hard for good owners to adopt the dogs, Scott said, and it's bad owners who are the real problem.

"The banger who likes the tough macho dog will get another (type of) dog," he said, adding it pushes dog fighting further underground. "The answer is heavier fines or jail sentences for animal abusers or dog fighters."

High insurance costs can also deter responsible owners in some cases from adopting pit bulls, Scott said.

Some areas now require pit bull owners to carry homeowner's or renter's insurance policies that cover their dogs. Calumet City requires all dog owners to carry insurance. Some insurers won't cover pit bulls or charge more.

Hammond, East Chicago and Lake County also have insurance requirements for owners of pit bulls and pit bull-type dogs, said Matt Lubarski, director of the Animal Control and Adoption Center of Lake County.

The breed actually scores higher in temperament tests than many other common breeds, Bober said. They've been bred to be aggressive to other animals, not people, she said, but owners can work on training them to overcome this, she said.

Lake County Animal Control field officer Jim Tobin said most of the pit bulls he brings in "are good dogs."

"They just don't know how to act," he said. "Inherently, no dog is bad. They know what you teach them. If you don't teach them anything, they are going to make something up."

Recent incidents involving pit bulls

Burnham officials are considering banning the breed after an 11-year-old girl had to climb onto the roof of a car to avoid two pit bulls who were chasing her and after complaints about loose and roaming pit bulls.

Last summer, a pit bull bit and dragged a 4-year-old boy down an alley an alley in Calumet City. In another incident, two pit bulls jumped a fence and attacked a family pet, which also happened to be a pit bull. Calumet City now requires all dog owners to carry homeowner's insurance that covers their dog and have a six-foot-high fence to let their dogs roam free in the back yard.

In July, a Portage police officer reportedly shot a charging, barking pit bull after a neighbor complained of an aggressive pit bull running loose.

In May 2006, 15 pit bulls were seized from a Gary firefighter's Calumet Township home.

In the largest dog-fighting raid in Illinois history, investigators found 37 dogs, mostly pit bulls, at a South Holland property in July.