



## Preventing Dog Bites

By Brenda F. Barnette, CEO

On September 13, 2002, the *Herald Republic* reported that the City Council of Mabton, Washington adopted an ordinance requiring that all dogs weighing more than 40 pounds must wear a muzzle or related bite-prevention device when in public. That ordinance, and others like it, intended to protect humans and smaller dogs, are very shortsighted and unfair to larger dogs. Today, thousands of gentle, large dogs are languishing in no-kill shelters and are being put to death in public shelters because of these misperceptions. Sadly, this kind of legislation influences people to assume that all large dogs are dangerous.

Today, there is a lot of talk about banning certain breeds and about strengthening dog laws to increase public safety. If passing laws worked we would have no public safety issues of any kind. We need to thoughtfully dissect the problems that lead to dangerous situations in our community and address them with effective education.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, bites to children comprise more than 50% of the total number of cases, and 61% of all dog attacks happen in the home or a familiar place. Additionally, 77% of dogs involved in a bite incident actually belong to the victim's family or a close friend.

Family dogs with no prior history of aggression might be provoked to bite when in pain or if they feel that they or their family is being threatened. We must use good judgment to protect ourselves and our dogs.

When entering a home with a dog, always remember that you are entering his territory. Go slowly and wait for an introduction. Give the dog space and don't try to become friends right away. Never move quickly when approaching a dog who is lying quietly or sleeping. When playing with a dog who is becoming overly excited, take a time out. Never tease a dog. Teasing is not fun for them – in fact, it can be quite alarming to them. Children under the age of five are most likely to be bitten. Never leave small children alone with a dog.

If you feel you are in a dangerous situation, do not run screaming from the dog. The dog may instinctively give chase. Do not make direct or prolonged eye contact – a dog who feels threatened could perceive this as a challenge. If an unknown dog approaches you, stand very still. If a dog knocks you down, roll up into a ball and remain as still as possible.

Most people consider companion animals to be best friends and family members. We must protect them from harmful situations as we do our children, our elders or any other family member. Take your dog to training classes; you'll get to know each other better. She will become trained and better socialized. You will learn to communicate with her, which will help you anticipate and respond to things that may frighten her and cause unacceptable behavior.

We can do a lot to protect our best friends from dangerous situations and prevent them from becoming another number in the dog bite statistics. Passing ordinances and adding laws is not the answer. Good judgment is the key to making our lives with dogs safer and more enjoyable. In turn, they will repay us with a lifetime of unconditional love and loyalty.