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PUSH TO END PIT BULL BANS GATHERS STEAM

Written by Jen Reeder



When Denver resident Alicia Dickson saw a photo of an adoptable dog with cute ears in 2016, her first thought wasn't: "This dog is illegal in my city." It was: "This is it. This is my dog."

She was well into the adoption process for Sugar, a former stray found in Texas with a litter of puppies and bullet shrapnel in her chest, when she realized the dog might be a pit bull mix. In 1989, Denver City Council banned dogs with the majority appearance of a pit bull – an umbrella term including American pit bull terriers, American Staffordshire terriers and Staffordshire bull terriers – in response to several high-profile attacks.

So Dickson followed the rescue organization's lead and always referred to her sweet dog as an "American bulldog mix." But she avoided parks and trails within city limits, even though Sugar loves other dogs and people.

"I was just always afraid that if something happened and she was involved in an altercation – even if she didn't do anything, even if she was attacked – that I'd get in trouble," she told The News Station. "It was always on my mind."

That changed in November 2020, when Denver residents voted to repeal the ban and replace it with special licensing. The law went into effect in January 2021, so now Dickson frequently takes Sugar to the local dog park.





Sugar. Photo courtesy of Alicia Dickson.

“I see tons of pitties there all the time now,” she said. “I see pitties everywhere now in Denver. It’s like they literally just came out of the shadows once the BSL (Breed-Specific Legislation) got replaced.”

Shira Hereld, who co-founded the community action group [Replace Denver BSL](#), said it’s a myth that pit bulls are more dangerous than other dogs. She noted that breed bans don’t actually make a community safer; for instance, there are still unlicensed dogs in the community who then are less likely to be trained, socialized or even vaccinated.

“It was appalling to all of us that a city that is as forward-thinking and liberal-minded as Denver normally is would have backwards legislation that wasn’t grounded in good science or good fact and was wasting the voters’ money,” she told The News Station.

Still, the battle over the legislation proved contentious. After Denver City Council passed legislation sponsored by Councilman Chris Herndon, Mayor Michael Hancock vetoed it – the first of his career. Colorado Governor Jared Polis then tweeted a photo of himself smiling with a friend’s pit bull inside the Governor’s mansion – which is within Denver city limits. The measure headed to the ballot, and 66.23% of voters [approved](#) it.

Hereld feels the onus is on all dog owners to protect public safety by being responsible, including spaying/neutering, obeying leash laws and reading a pet’s body language to know when a dog is feeling uncomfortable and should be removed from a situation. She’s thrilled to see that shift occurring in Denver and nationwide.

“There was a huge cascade of breed bans falling, including the major ones in Denver and Aurora this last year,” she said. “It’s just extremely exciting, and truly it’s my hope that within the next ten years we see the end of breed bans in the United States. I think that is an extremely realistic goal.”

The National Fight

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) opposes BSL (the term for laws that regulate or ban certain dog breeds in an attempt at public safety) due in part to a [study](#) that found breed isn’t an indicator of whether a dog will bite – but responsible ownership is. The American Bar Association passed a [resolution](#) urging adoption of breed-neutral dog laws, and the American Kennel Club [opposes](#) any dangerous dog laws based on the breed or appearance of an animal.

Kevin O’Neill, vice president of state affairs for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals ([ASPCA](#)), said the organization recommends communities enact strategic dangerous dog laws that address individual animals, rather than blanket breed bans. But while [21 states](#) prohibit BSL, over 700 U.S. cities have enacted breed-specific laws (and home-rule cities, like Denver, can pass their own laws).

“Every dog is unique, even dogs within the same breed,” he told The News Station. “Treating dogs as individuals, providing them with the care, training and supervision they require, and judging them by their behavior and not by their physical appearance is the most effective way to ensure that dogs and people can continue to share safe and happy lives together.”

O’Neill noted that because the “pit bull” label is often given to dogs regardless of their genetic makeup, a wide range of mixed-breed dogs are often stereotyped as dangerous. So in shelters, pit bull-type dogs are the most at-risk dogs for euthanasia.



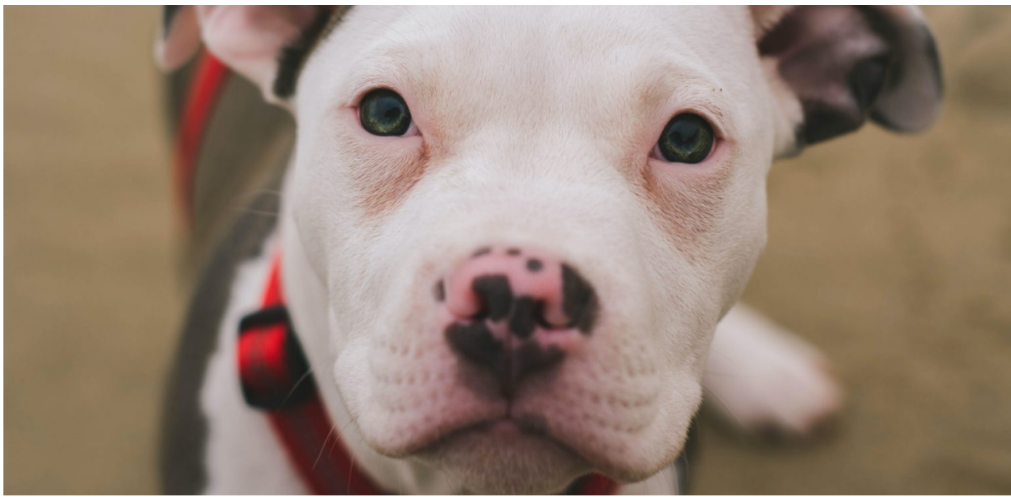


Photo by Lucas Ludwig

They're also commonly discriminated against in renters' and homeowners' insurance policies. Most insurance companies (State Farm and USAA are notable exceptions) refuse to issue policies or will increase premiums on owners of certain breeds.

"At a time of unprecedented housing challenges, the cost and availability of property insurance is an unnecessary barrier to housing for responsible dog owners," he said, adding that the ASPCA is currently working to support the passage of legislation in [New York](#) and [Nevada](#) that would put an end to breed-specific insurance discrimination.

Roots in Racism

Racial discrimination is an "unconscionable" component of BSL, according to Ledy Vankavage, senior legislative attorney for [Best Friends Animal Society](#). About a decade ago, she argued against breed discrimination in a city council meeting when the mayor pulled her aside and said, "We just don't want those people moving into Florissant, Mo."

"I was aghast," she told The News Station. "It boggles my mind. But I think there's a lot of discrimination involved in breed-specific legislation."

She cited a [study](#) titled "The Black Man's Dog: The Social Context of Breed Specific Legislation," in which participants were given photos of golden retrievers, dachshunds, Maltese, American pit bull terriers, collies, and German shepherds and asked to guess the owner's race, gender and age.

"The vast majority of folks thought white people owned all the dogs except for the pit bull – that it was owned by young Black males," she said.

In other [studies](#), participants could only correctly identify 25% of dog breeds, which leads to inaccurate dog bite reporting, whether mixes or purebred dogs are involved.

"Any discrimination against dogs or their owners is simply wrong and un-American, and we need to stop it," she said.

In addition to pit bulls, breeds that commonly face BSL – or as Best Friends prefers, "Breed-Discriminatory Legislation" – include Rottweilers, Doberman pinschers, Siberian huskies, Alaskan malamutes and German shepherds.

"In South Dakota, there was even a town that banned blue heelers," she said. "I really think some city council members just don't like their neighbor's dog, and so they pass an ordinance against it and just keep adding breeds. So really, any breed is at risk in states that allow cities to do this."

Vankavage was part of a team that worked with the [International Municipal Lawyers Association](#) to update its model dangerous dog law – essentially a [template](#) used by attorneys across the country to shape local policy – to remove breed discrimination in 2018.

Best Friends also inspired seven of 14 states (so far) to repeal laws mandating dogs seized from dog-fighting rings immediately be euthanized after using positive training methods to successfully rehabilitate 22 pit bulls rescued from Michael Vick's Bad Newz Kennels in 2007, as highlighted in the documentary "[The Champions](#)."

Challenging Pit Bull Myths

Still, public perception that pit bulls are somehow more inherently vicious than other dogs, or that they have physical qualities that are different than other dogs, are hard to shake even if untrue.

"Some things are just silly, like 'Their jaws lock.' Their physiology is no different than any other dog," Vankavage said. "And that's one of the things that we hear all the time: 'They just snap.' No, they really don't just snap. For any dog behavior, you can kind of tell what they're thinking if you know dogs. You can look at the way their tails are, or their ears or their eyes, and figure out what they are thinking. So a lot of times it's just people that don't know dogs, that don't

know how to read the signals, or to train their dogs.”

The issue is both professional and personal for Vankavage. She grew up with a loyal pit bull named Boody (“I named her when I was four”) and as an adult, she’s adopted pit bulls, including a dog named Karma who was rescued from a dog-fighting ring.



Photo by Cierra Voelkl

“We had two other dogs at the time, so it took a bit to introduce her to the other dogs, but then she was fine,” she said. “And she’s got to be the best dog we’ve ever had with cats. They would sleep on top of her, they would knead her with their little claws, and she wouldn’t care.”

She’s encouraged by recent BSL repeals in [Maumell](#), Arkansas; [Liberal](#), Kansas; and [Aurora](#), Colorado — an eastern suburb of Denver.

“We are seeing a huge trend of repeals,” she said.

Not only are repeals happening, but no new BSL is being introduced. The Animal Farm Foundation, a pit bull advocacy group, maintains a [map](#) of the United States that shows not only where BSL exists, but where it’s been repealed or rejected.

Stacey Coleman, executive director of both the [Animal Farm Foundation](#) and the [National Canine Research Council](#), a nonprofit canine behavior, science and policy think tank, said rejection and repeal is happening rapidly while there are virtually no new instances of Breed-Specific Legislation being passed.

“I can’t think of anything even in the last year and a half,” she told The News Station.

Several years ago, Coleman met with legislators and attorneys in a small town in New York’s Catskill Mountains who wanted to enact a breed ban, supposedly in response to an incident. She explained that breed bans are illegal in the state and tried to offer suggestions of ways to entice dog owners to comply with existing laws when the real impetus for the ban emerged.

“What they said to me was, ‘We don’t really have a problem with the dog. It’s the Mexicans who bring their dogs into town. And we figured that if we tell them they can’t have their dogs in town, then they’ll stay out.’ At which point I just gathered my stuff and I said, ‘That’s a kind of hate I can’t help you with, and I’m not going to play,’” she said. “I can’t even count the number of times that people have said to me, ‘Well, we’re not trying to take away *your* dog’ – which is code for ‘upper middle-class white woman.’”

Animal Farm Foundation’s next major lawsuits against cities with actively enforced pit bull bans include Keota, Iowa; Williston, North Dakota; and Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Creating Breed Ambassadors

Laurie Williams, certified professional dog trainer and owner of [Pup ‘N’ Iron Canine Enrichment Center](#) in Fredericksburg, Vir., said any dog – and even “any being with teeth” – can bite. So she agrees that a key component to public safety is responsible dog ownership.

“It all comes down to responsible and proactive dog ownership,” she told The News Station. “Most people wait until

their dog has either done something or is doing something that is undesirable to them, and then they get training. So proactive is putting them in training right away – as soon as you get the puppy, as soon as you adopt the dog.”



Photo by Taylor Deas-Melesh

Since most dogs growl or bite due to fear rather than inherent aggression, Williams uses and recommends humane training with positive reinforcement (i.e. rewards like treats or play, depending on the dog’s preference) as opposed to punishment. She’s trained numerous pit bulls who came from “unsavory situations” over the past 35 years.

She also encourages offering enrichment activities to dogs, such as filling a cardboard box with shredded paper and hiding treats inside – then letting the dog have at it. Working toward passing the AKC’s *Canine Good Citizen* test helps train a dog in obedience and can lead to exemptions from “dangerous breed” restrictions on insurance policies.

Ultimately, Williams hopes everyone will train their dogs to their full potential, particularly with misunderstood breeds that society can consider “dangerous.”

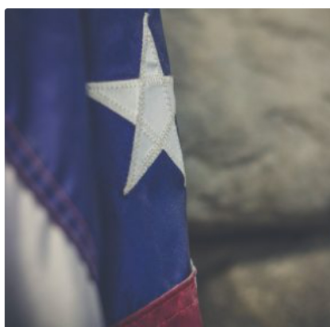
“It is your responsibility for your dog to be the best ambassador of that breed,” she said. “So you definitely want to train to that level.”



Jen Reeder

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. Bylines include BBC News, The Christian Science Monitor, The Daily Beast, Inside Your Dog’s Mind, HuffPost, TODAY.com, PBS’s Next Avenue and many others. Visit her at JenReeder.com.

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